Temily’s Learning Report:

2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21)

The COP21 conference that concluded in December 2015 marks a significant turning point in human history. After twenty years of failed negotiations, 2015 finally marked the year when the world was able to come to a binding agreement to reduce anthropogenic climate change.

I had the honor of representing HKU at COP21 and this report is a brief summary of my learning and observations. A more personal, interactive and visual account of my observations can be viewed at my blog cop21reflections.wordpress.com.

Over 50,000 people are said to have attended COP21 so I was one small drop in a large ocean of people. COP21 attendees represented all walks of life: students, activists, scientists, civil society, governments and even celebrities. What immediately struck me was the unifying power of this global climate crisis. It affects us one and all, regardless of country and background. Although I walked into my first day at the conference knowing that there was much uncertainty as to whether an agreement would be reached, I was already deeply moved by the sheer diversity of humanity represented. It was a very powerful symbol of hope.

Since I was not part of an official government delegation, my days at COP21 were not spent in the negotiation rooms, but rather in the dozens of side panels that took place every day. A fellow participant said: “I feel like I’m a kid shopping in a candy store. There are so many panels happening at the same time; I don’t know which ones to choose!” His analogy truly captured the struggle that I faced on a daily basis. So how did I go about choosing which panel discussions to attend? Well, in some ways, my own areas of interest naturally narrowed down the options. My background is in social science and I’m currently doing a PhD researching social changes occurring in indigenous communities.

Many people generally assume that climate change is the realm of environmental scientists alone, but you may be surprised to know that social science is just as relevant. Addressing climate change requires a change in human behavior and culture and this is very much within the realm of the social sciences. During my two weeks there, I attended panels that explored many of these themes: youth in decision-making, women’s rights and climate change, climate change and forced migration, traditional knowledge and sustainable development, values-based climate-change education, interfaith dialogue on climate change, and principles for accountability in climate agreements.

What I took away from these multi-faceted panel discussions is the conviction that the long-term solution to climate change requires a fundamental questioning of the values around which we orient our lives. It is only when we start to question things on the level of values and principles that we can truly unify to address the cause of the problem, rather than limit our solutions to addressing symptoms. Furthermore, the long-term solution to addressing climate change requires a change in individuals, institutions and communities.
This change cannot merely be top-down, it has to be bottom-up as well. This was especially apparent at the talks and panels I attended that were hosted at the Indigenous Peoples Pavilion. Indigenous peoples around the world have often been left out of policy decision-making even though their communities are most impacted by many issues, including climate change. (See my blog for a short video interview I did with an indigenous activist from Indonesia)

I also had the opportunity to present on a panel hosted by the International Environment Forum on the theme of community resilience. Our panel explored how existing patterns of community life can greatly impact how people respond to natural disasters. The question, then, is how to consciously create a culture of unity in our communities so that we are better able to respond to disasters that might occur. I shared the case of a diverse Malaysian neighborhood that, triggered by severe floods in 2014, began to have monthly interfaith devotional gatherings to bring the community together. After praying, they would consult about how they could collectively improve their neighborhood. These monthly gatherings ultimately resulted in some families pooling resources to purchase a small boat, so that in the event of a future flood, they would be in a place to help each other. Every community and neighborhood has its own culture and needs, but I think this idea of grassroots dialogue, though simple, contributes to humanity’s long-term resilience.

If there is one sentence that can summarize my learning at COP21, it is that every single field of knowledge, every aspect of human endeavor, is related to addressing climate change. No matter what you’re studying, chances are that what you’re learning is relevant to the discourse on climate change. Students and educators alike can, and should, start making this link more apparent. But more importantly, we need to broaden our sense of identity and create a shared vision of the future we want. It is only when we see ourselves as citizens of the world that we will find the volition to come together to solve this pressing issue that knows no borders.