UC SANTA BARBARA

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Climate Champions

Beginning today and continuing through December 11, delegates from 195 countries are meeting in Paris for the Conference of the Parties 21st Annual United Nations Climate Summit (COP 21). Also in attendance are approximately 15 UC Santa Barbara students, faculty members and alumni, who are studying the international climate justice movement while participating in it.

John Foran, a professor of sociology and of environmental studies at UCSB, is leading the contingent. Foran, who has attended the past four annual climate summits, considers himself and his co-researchers “scholar-activists,” because they take part in the movements they study. He believes unequivocally that this year’s meeting is critically important for the future of climate policy and for the ever-deteriorating condition of the earth and atmosphere.

“The climate crisis is the defining issue of the 21st century,” Foran said. “It’s the ultimate existential threat to civilization. The people alive on the planet right now are going to have to deal with it in our lifetimes, for better or worse.”

According to Foran, the UCSB delegation is the largest from any of the University of California campuses, and is composed of postdoctoral researchers, alumni, graduate and undergraduate students, some of whom are already studying abroad in Europe.

Richard Widick, who received his Ph.D. in sociology from UCSB and is currently a visiting scholar at UCSB’s Orfalea Center for Global & International Studies, is inside the conference, filming footage for a feature-length documentary. The rest of the

group is interviewing, writing about, filming and photographing the many climate justice advocates in Paris to observe and, they hope, influence the complicated negotiations between nations.

Foran and his fellow researchers are compiling their real-time evaluations into frequent updates on the Climate Justice Project website.

At COP 21, each country in attendance is making an individual pledge regarding the efforts it is prepared to make to cut emissions and carbon dependency beginning in 2020. This is in contrast to previous summits, during which attending countries were tasked with reducing emissions by the same amount across the board.

Pledges and Commitments

UCSB assistant professor of political science Matto Mildenberger, who studies political inaction on the issue of climate change, is not at the conference, but he is watching closely as the events unfold. His research is directly related to understanding why ambition in climate change policy varies from country to country.

“Climate change is one of the most significant policy challenges that both the U.S. government and international community has ever faced,” Mildenberger said. “So far, the political response has been lacking, and certainly hasn’t been enough to mitigate the serious economic and social harm that lots of people around the world have and will experience.”

The UN and some of the governments who comprise the COP hope that the voluntary nature of the commitments at the conference this year mean that all nations in attendance have buy-in, and will pledge to make changes in accordance with factors like economy, population size and relative development. Others disagree.

Foran has mixed feelings about the possible outcome, asserting that the climate change math simply does not add up. “It’s a noble effort, and I would love to see a global climate treaty,” he said. “But I think it’s more important to have an ambitious, fair and legally-binding treaty, and it will be none of those.

“It’s good that every country in the world is going to have to make some commitment,” he continued. “The large, wealthier countries that have historically been responsible for most of the greenhouse gases are going to have to take

responsibility and make the biggest cuts in their emissions."

But, Foran added, it's distressing, because the outcome won't be ambitious enough to make the difference needed, and will essentially be a collection of non-binding promises. "A number of independent assessments have been made of these pledges, which are basically all in by now, and so we know that if carried out to the fullest extent (which, again, is just a promise), they would give us between 2.7 and, say, 3.3 degrees global warming," he said. "We have now experienced only 0.85 or 0.9, and we can plainly see the devastating effects of just this much."

The UN has set a broad goal of reducing carbon emissions enough to keep the surface temperature of the earth from rising more than two degrees Celsius. Foran doesn't think that this is enough, and neither he nor Mildenberger thinks that global governments are currently positioned to be successful at handling all of the issues inherent in climate change.

According to Mildenberger, besides emissions (both from manufacturing and from agriculture), there are issues of rising sea levels, deforestation and economic disparity at play. "India, for example, believes that putting restrictions on its carbon pollution unfairly constrains its economic development," he said. "Finding an equitable way to manage that is still a core problem in global climate negotiations."

Foran believes that until the citizens of the world unite to demand meaningful results, and governments represent their voices, nations won't be motivated to ratify (or follow through on) the ambitious and fair treaty that the planet deserves.

In Paris, he would rather see no treaty than a minimally effective one. "I think the best outcome would be no outcome, because I don't want to see an inadequate treaty locked down and victory in the fight against climate change declared," he said.

A Critical Issue

These issues are also being discussed on the UCSB campus. Foran and Ken Hiltner, a professor of English and of environmental studies (and director of the campus's Environmental Humanities Initiative) are leading this year's Critical Issues in America series. Administered by the College of Letters & Science, the annual slate of talks and events examines topics of contemporary national concern or significance from a multidisciplinary perspective.

>With “Climate Futures: This Changes Everything” the topic for 2015-16, the series has already featured screenings and panels that address climate change and climate justice. More events are planned through December of 2016, with Foran’s trip to COP 21 directly influencing future programming ideas.

Foran praised UCSB’s support of environmental initiatives. “A lot of the real best efforts to mitigate emissions and to adapt are happening at the local level, in cities and different communities,” he said. “That is a real bottom-up effort. California is at the center of that, UC is leading it and UCSB is a place where we have dynamic action on climate justice.”

Mildenberger agrees that local support is crucial, backing up his assertion with scholarly analysis of past failed climate initiatives. “In some ways, global climate negotiations have often put the cart before the horse,” he explained. “They assume that all you have to do is create a global climate agreement and that will fix all of the domestic conflict that exists over climate change.”

He continued: “In fact, I think it’s the opposite. What you need is to have this domestic conflict in each country individually, arrive at some political agreement on how to take action within the country, and then you can use the global climate agreement as a way of reinforcing and slowly increasing policy ambition.”

Whatever the future of climate negotiation may hold, Foran said he is excited by what he sees as a shift in the role of the activist. He points out that while he will be criticizing and protesting the deal on the table in Paris, the aim is to encourage governments to agree on the deal humanity needs. He sees it as the way of the future — citizens urging world leaders to cohere behind an effective solution for everyone. “We are there to raise these issues,” he said of a potential ‘people’s’ global climate agreement, “and to help bring it about.”

Looking to the Future

In an open letter to Christiana Figueres, executive secretary to the United Nations Famework Convention on Climate Change, COP 21 president Laurent Fabius and COP 21 delegates, Foran and 15 other scholars, policy analysts and climate activists from around the world shared their deep concerns about climate change as the greatest threat to the future of the planet. Among the scholars is Kum-Kum Bhavnani, a professor of sociology at UCSB and chair of the campus's Faculty Legislature.

“We have seen the damage done by the fossil fuel corporations who are now holding us back from developing a treaty that such fuels be phased out by 2050 at the latest,” reads the letter, which is posted on The World Post, a partnership of The Huffington Post and Berggruen Institute. “It is an issue of survival, especially for marginalised peoples: poor women, indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, pensioners, urban slum dwellers, and rural communities who are affected by drought and food shortage, and who are forced out as displaced populations.“

“Our letter calls for centering gender, indigenous rights, and resource distribution so that humanity can enjoy a low-carbon, sustainable, and deeply democratic future,” the scholar-activists continued.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.