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Institutional Control and Climate Change Activism at COP 21 in Paris

Shannon K. Orr*

Abstract
The 21st meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Paris faced two particular challenges: the growth of civil society participation in the negotiations, and significant security concerns following the terrorist attacks on the city two weeks prior to the start of the negotiations. This report reflects on the impacts of these two challenges through an overview of civil society participation at the COP, highlighting the implications for the accountability of the negotiations.

Civil society has been actively participating in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations since the first Conference of the Parties (COP) in 1995, when 979 nongovernmental observers were permitted to attend (UNFCCC 1995). Since that time, participation has steadily grown, with new organizations being accredited every year. With such growth comes growing pains, as was clearly highlighted by COP 21 (2015), at which unprecedented restrictions and controls were imposed on the 6,306 observers from 1,079 organizations that were permitted inside the negotiations (UNFCCC 2015).

This forum reflects on civil society expansion under institutional control at COP 21, and how the growth of climate change activism has created increasing pressure on the United Nations to accommodate the thousands of people wishing to be physically present at the negotiations. Particular attention is given to the climate justice movement at the COP, which emphasizes the intersection of environmental issues with racial/social and economic inequities. Despite historic claims of nonstate influence within the climate change negotiations (Audet 2013; Ciplet 2014; Downie 2014), civil society at COP 21 had limited agency, especially in changing the terms of engagement or resisting structural limitations imposed on them. Although the terrorist attacks in Paris two weeks before the start of the negotiations clearly played an important role in restricting protest activities, it must be noted that many of the restrictions had been imposed

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far in advance of those attacks, reflecting an institutional shift to a more restricted/limited form of civil society participation within the UNFCCC than had been customary in the past. While civil society encompasses a broad range of actors, including business and industry interests, this reflection focuses primarily on the climate activists, who were particularly affected by the participation restrictions.

**Civil Society at the COP: Institutional Constraints**

As was noted by Fisher (2010), the UN climate negotiations have to date been relatively inclusive of civil society participants. Registration to the UNFCCC is open to all accredited observer organizations, and accreditation itself is not difficult to achieve. The first COP that I attended was COP 8 (Delhi), and it is striking how much has changed since that experience in 2002. With far fewer civil society participants at COP 8 than at the recent COPs, civil society and government delegates interacted much more closely, including being invited together to attend a host country gala. Far fewer participants meant much greater access for observers and more opportunities for collaboration with governments. Since that time, the climate movement has expanded dramatically. The rise in activist networks, organized lobbying, and increased presence on government delegations has created a more highly professional level of participation for many observers (Audet 2013; Betzold 2014; Derman 2014; Downie 2014). Today more than 1,880 NGOs are accredited (UNFCCC 2015), a significant increase from the 506 organizations that were accredited in 2002 (Orr 2006).

The “growing pains” of this developing climate movement first became apparent in Copenhagen at COP 15. With global attention focused on the Copenhagen negotiations, high expectations for a historic document to replace the soon-to-expire Kyoto Protocol, and grassroots activism gathering steam, the UN made the controversial move to limit the participation of the 13,500 civil society participants. Just 1,000 IGO/NGO participants on Thursday, and 90 on Friday (the last day of the meeting), were permitted inside. The response by civil society ranged from disappointment to rage (Dimitrov 2010; Fisher 2010; Death 2011; McGregor 2011).

In partial response to the anger at civil society being restricted at the last minute in Copenhagen (Fisher 2010), COP 21 introduced highly restricted participation limits from the beginning, at the registration stage—limiting most organizations to just a small number of slots (typically, two to five), in contrast to the number requested (many requested 100+). As a contact point for an observer organization, I received an unprecedented number of requests from

1. In an interview a representative with Climate Reality stated that they were given just six slots, and one of those was reserved for founder and former Vice-President of the United States Al Gore (personal interview).
individuals around the world asking to join my delegation because they did not have enough slots of their own, although we were given just two of the twenty-five requested. On the one hand, this at least allowed organizations to plan accordingly (unlike in Copenhagen); however, it also raised the ire of many who felt that civil society was being shut out of the negotiations. As one youth activist commented in an interview about the participation issues: “we are told we are the future and it’s all up to you, but we don’t have any support.” Civil society was not the only ones to feel the effects of limited registrations: More than 6,000 media representatives applied for accreditation, but only 3,000 spots were available, and even government delegations were given two levels of access, limiting those who could participate in exclusive meetings.

**Activism at COP 21: The Political Context of Terrorism**

No one ever thought COP 21 was going to be easy: The global challenges were immense, the timeline was short, and the political will seemed uncertain. Then, on the evening of Friday November 13, 2015, two weeks before the negotiations, six coordinated terrorist attacks took place in Paris and the northern suburb of Saint-Denis. In all, 130 people were killed and hundreds wounded, making them the deadliest attacks in France since World War II, and the deadliest in the European Union since the 2004 Madrid train bombings. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant militant group (ISIL) claimed responsibility for the attacks as retaliation for French airstrikes on ISIL targets in Iraq and Syria.

**Response to the Attacks and the COP 21**

On Saturday November 14, the prime minister of France announced that the global climate summit would go on despite the attacks. On TF1 television that evening, he said the conference “will be held because it’s an essential meeting for humanity,” and spoke of the conference as a time for world leaders to show their solidarity with France by participating in the negotiations. Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC, tweeted “Of course #COP21 proceeds as planned. Even more so now. #COP21=respecting our differences & same time acting together collaboratively.”

Civil society organizers from climate change activist organizations, including Avaaz and 350.org, immediately raised concerns about how these new security concerns would impact the negotiations. More than 130 organizations had been planning a Paris Climate March on November 29, the eve of the summit.

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3. As reported by the BBC, December 9, 2015.
5. Christiana Figueres (@CFigueres), November 14, 2015, 12:23am.
and they were expecting 200,000 people to participate in what was being billed as a historic event. Lead organizers called an emergency meeting for Monday to discuss both the risks and the propriety of holding such a gathering.6

On Monday evening, 350.org issued a press release on behalf of the march organizers, stating:

The tragedy in Paris has only strengthened our resolve. This movement for climate justice has always also been a movement for peace—a way for people around the world to come together, no matter their background or religion, and fight to protect our common home. Over the coming days, we will continue to discuss with the French authorities how we can move forward with the March, plans for December 12th, and other demonstrations. We fully share their concerns about public safety—just as we fully oppose any unnecessary crackdowns on civil liberties and minority populations. We can think of few better responses to violence and terror than this movement’s push for peace and hope. No matter the final plans for the march in Paris, we urge people to join other Global Climate Marches around the world to show their solidarity and support—there couldn’t be a more important time to push for climate justice, and the peace it can help bring.7

To the disappointment of the organizers and the thousands who were planning to attend, on November 19 the French government and Paris Prefecture of Police announced that the Paris People’s Climate March would be cancelled. A state of emergency was declared, and all public demonstrations were banned. The response by activists on social media vacillated between anger at authorities, concerns about personal safety, and the need to respect the victims of the attacks. Organizers of the march acted quickly to organize an alternative symbolic action, to cover the surrounding streets with shoes representing marching feet in the Place de la République. In a demonstration of the speed and effectiveness of using social media to organize activists, more than 20,000 shoes were displayed, including Pope Francis’ plain black shoes and Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s running shoes (Politi 2015).

As many have previously noted, civil society participation is typically characterized by insider and outsider tactics (Cabré 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998; O’Neill 2004; Orr 2006; Orr 2007; Betzold 2014; Ciplet 2014). However, the ongoing security concerns at the COP led to unprecedented control over civil society activities at a climate change COP. While many governments expanded their delegations to include civil society participants who were not able to get observer spots, outsider tactics were under strict institutional control within the formal UN spaces. Although the Climate Action Network continued its traditional awarding of the “Fossil of the Day” award to those countries that they deem to be obstructing the negotiations, a very popular public shaming event on every day of the COP, they did so under the careful eye of security. Protests

and other types of theater in the accredited negotiation space were tightly controlled. UN security allowed for six places inside and outside the buildings for protests to occur, and organizations were expected to fill out paperwork in advance to get approval, detailing the nature of their event and the expected attendance. As expected, many civil society organizers were angry at these continuing restrictions.

After the draft text was released on Wednesday December 9, with nearly one hundred points of disagreement that had to be resolved, hundreds of activists staged a march and a sit-in protest, the largest protest inside the COP up to that point.

Whether in an effort to control their own work or from a desire to maintain their unique grassroots identity, activists also created their own spaces in Paris separate from the Generations area, another topic worthy of future research. The People’s Climate Summit was held December 5 and 6, and the Climate Action Zone was open from December 7 to 11. Both featured various workshops, demonstrations, art exhibits, updates on the negotiations, debates, and opportunities for mobilization. These spaces also spurred organization: The morning of Saturday December 12, despite the ban on public demonstration, thousands of activists marched on the Avenue de la Grande Armée as delegates reviewed the final draft of the agreement back at the Le Bourget conference center. Police stood guard but ultimately allowed the event to happen.

**Climate Generations**

To address concerns about limited civil society accreditation, the General Secretariat, in cooperation with civil society groups, developed the temporary Climate Generations space adjacent to the formal negotiations as an open public space for climate change discourse, debate, and events. The Climate Generations building was intended to be an “international space for debates and exchanges linked to the ecological transition on the one hand and the discovery of solutions to address climate disruptions, provided by civil society, on the other” (COP 21 2015), for both international attendees and the general public. The space was made up of three large exhibit halls, central gathering spaces, ten conference rooms, a movie theater, and a large auditorium. The security presence was tight, and all visitors had to enter through metal detectors.

While it was promoted as a forum for civil society, the Climate Generations building was clearly official UN space, akin to a highly professionalized corporate trade show with more than 120 exhibits and twenty interactive educational exhibits. In stark contrast to Copenhagen, where the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs booked civil society space quite a distance away and let civil society take the lead, the Generations space was staffed by UN workers/volunteers. It had official UN signs and maps and played host to a number of official side conferences, including private, invitation-only corporate meetings attended by many of those whom civil society activists were protesting against. By
providing a full program of activities, the Generations space potentially legitimized the cutting of spots to the negotiations, yet for many the purpose of attending a COP is to lobby, engage with delegates, and influence the final text, not to watch movies and listen to academic reports about climate change.

Many of those I interviewed expressed ambivalence and uncertainty about the Generations area, particularly those who had attended previous COPs. On the one hand, civil society organizations wanted the chance to showcase their work, to have opportunities for debates, to foster dialogue, and to have connections with the negotiation area, in particular access to information. While those opportunities were certainly present, the “slickness” of it all was quite discordant with the grassroots nature of so much of civil society. As one activist commented, “I came to see it but I won’t be back.” In a show of great irony, given the seriousness of the issues at hand, attendees at the Generations space were treated to a tightly secured, fun, and lively space, including a solar powered DJ, film screenings, and a free juice bar.

Conclusion

There is an important argument to be made that civil society helps hold the United Nations accountable (Bruno and Karliner 2002; Szporluk 2009; Anderson 2011). By breaking open the closed nature of negotiations, holding press conferences, interacting with delegates, and attracting media attention through protests and other grassroots activity, they force public attention to treaty negotiations and the critically important decisions facing the world today (Orr 2006).

While it is difficult to say exactly what COP 21 would have been like if the Paris terrorist attacks had never happened, it was clear that one of the goals of the negotiations at COP 21 was to keep civil society in its place. It raises the question, what are the acceptable limits on participation? To what degree is the COP a space for international decision-making, and to what degree is it a space for civil society? A recent study by Hjerpe and Nasiritousi (2015) highlights the ongoing belief that the UNFCCC is the best forum for addressing climate change, or at least that there are no other significant alternatives. However, an important conversation needs to take place about the role of civil society as we continue to move forward. At no other COP had the distinction between decision-makers and the rest been so clear: VIP rooms, tiered delegate levels, exclusive events, restricted participation, and tight security kept civil society firmly in its place.

In looking back on COP 21 through a comparative lens, we see increased restrictions on participation and a relatively successful outcome. Inevitably, this raises the question: Did the terrorist attacks on Paris increase the likelihood of a successful treaty, due to a sense of global unity in a time of crisis? Did the restrictions on participation/distractions create the conditions for a successful treaty? These will be questions for future research by climate movement scholars. However, if you value civic engagement in climate negotiations, the
combination of great restrictions and a self-congratulatory outcome is a worrisome association.

References


