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A week in Durban

The UN Climate Change Summit 2011 is on its way in Durban, South Africa. Our representative **Dr Cynthia Carliell-Marquet (/staff/profiles/civil/carliell-marquet-cynthia.aspx)** , is at the conference to understand what the discussions around the table means for Birmingham and the University.

This will be in the context of new opportunities for Birmingham around creating business opportunities and new technologies for a low carbon city and how the University's expertise will play a significant role in creating a sustainable city. This will centre around discussions at the Summit concerning the key outcomes for cities as they move towards sustainability, decarbonisation and retrofitting and how Birmingham and the University are well placed with expertise to move these new technologies forward.

Doing nothing is unthinkable - Friday 2 December

My last day at COP17 and still so much to do but I will have to admit defeat and not see and hear everything! I decide to go back to the party negotiations and join a plenary session on the AWG-KP (which stands for the Annex Working Group on the Kyoto Protocol – those abbreviations again). I haven't mentioned the Kyoto Protocol yet but it is very significant in the world of climate change. It is the only legally-binding international agreement to limit greenhouse gases, through which almost all developed economies (other than the United States) have committed to reducing emissions. The Kyoto Protocol was adopted in 1997 at COP3 (Japan) and came into force (i.e. became legally binding) at COP11 (in Canada) in 2005. The big deal for Durban COP17 is that end of the first legally-binding commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol falls on the 31st December 2012 and that if no further commitment period is negotiated at COP17, the mechanisms set up to drive global decarbonisation will have no framework within which to function and could even cease to exist. This would be a major step backwards for the world. So the work of the AWG-KP is vital and I am keen to hear what progress has been made over the first week of COP17. This time the plenary session is much less full and I get a seat easily. The chair of the AWG-KP is very calm and measured but it seems a long way to go for a consensus to be reached, with the split between developing and developed countries still very apparent and emotions still running high about who is responsible for climate change and who should be taking action, never mind agreeing on the length of the next commitment period and the market mechanisms within it. The chair ends the main session by urging all parties to work hard and fast towards finding convergence, particularly with the second week approaching when the politicians arrive at COP17 and decisions need to be made.

There is a little time left in the AWG-KP plenary session and the chair opens it up to the floor. I wasn't expecting much to be added and almost left but I am glad I didn't. A 24 year old South African spoke on behalf of the youth (the YOUNGOs) at COP17. He was particularly eloquent in reminding everyone that the decisions made at COP17 will have a major impact on their generation, no matter where in the world they might live, and that the political wrangling must take into account the seriousness of the consequences of further indecision. Idealistic, yes, but that is, in my opinion, an important role of the youth at COP17. Young people have the energy and vision to imagine an alternate future and think it possible to find solutions to difficult global problems, simply because to do nothing is unthinkable. And then he went a step further in trying to find convergence: delegates were asked to "put your hands up if you are wearing shoes" (bewildered looks but some hands go up), then "put up your hands if you didn't have enough sleep last night" (this obviously struck a chord because there were more hands up now) ..... and "put up your hands if you think the current commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol has been worthwhile" (lots of hands) and finally "put up your hands if you think we can find common ground on which to base the next commitment period" (lots of hands stay up). The tension went out of the atmosphere in the hall and there was a spontaneous round of applause. I leave thinking how lucky I am to work with courageous and intelligent young people just like that every day at the University of Birmingham. Tomorrow I must leave COP17 and South Africa but I will be following the second week with anticipation of an outcome that will indeed steer the global economy onto a low-carbon, climate-safe path, because to do nothing is, in my opinion, unthinkable.

Smart cities of the future - Thursday 1 December

Today, I am not dropping in on the party negotiations at COP17 but I am instead in one of the exhibition centres where many of the side events take place. Side events are where delegates (mostly the NGOs) present case studies and research covering any aspect of climate change (adaptation, mitigation measures, human rights, legal and economic aspects to name a few). There are hundreds of side events going on in various locations, in addition to the party negotiations, so you are never lost for something to do at COP17. I personally want to get to grips with the REDD+ mechanism (reducing emissions through preventing deforestation and forest destruction) but for the moment my focus is on low carbon cities of the future, which is the reason I am here. At lunch time I meet up with colleagues from the 'Centre for Low Carbon Futures' (CLCF) to talk about our joint side event presentation on 'Energy Efficiency at the City Scale'. We meet up in the RINGO room, a cubicle in the exhibition section that can be used by any research-related NGO at COP17 to put the finishing touches to our presentations that will explore the most cost-effective and efficient ways to decarbonise cities across the globe; but why the focus on cities?

Well, cities consume the majority of the world's energy, are responsible for the major proportion of global greenhouse gas emissions, and more than half the world's population already live in cities. At the same time, cities (and particularly the urban poor) are very vulnerable to storms, droughts and floods, which are all predicted to become more frequent and more ferocious as the global temperature rises.

So cities must adapt to climate change to survive and they must evolve into low carbon economies if the pledges made by the international community in Cancun are to become a reality. I should mention here that the City of Birmingham is going to be presented with the World Green Cities award 2011 at COP17 for their move towards a low carbon economy, which is fitting because many researchers at the University of Birmingham are very busy trying to answer questions such as "What will the smart cities of the future look like and how will they function?". We want to create and design cities with resilient infrastructure, smart transport systems and smart grid systems, which allow a range of energy sources (think wind, solar, biomass, hydrogen, nuclear) to work together to deliver a low carbon city of the future. If you find this interesting, we are always looking for new ideas and talented researchers so please do get in touch.

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Different points of view - Wednesday 30 November 2011

My first day at COP17 and I am pretty excited as I have been following these annual climate change negotiations for years but this is the first time I am attending one. I arrive to a carnival-like atmosphere in the outer exhibition area (open to the public), with live music, exhibitions and giant puppets wandering around in the blazing sunshine. I can't see any protestors today, which is rather disappointing as I was hoping to catch a glimpse of the tree protestors from Brazil, with their very theatrical costumes, who have already made headlines in the newspapers. Leaving this area, security is much tighter and all bags and people are required to go through airport-style security checks. I get my UNFCCC badge (required to be worn at all times) with a yellow stripe indicating I am attending as a NGO (non-governmental organisation); pink stripes are for delegates representing the Parties, blue for UN staff and there is a big international press presence as well. When I arrive the plenary session for the CDM is just starting and, as it is an open session, NGOs can attend. CDM, by the way, stands for Clean Development Mechanism. The UNFCCC (UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) has a bewildering array of abbreviations and I can highly recommend the abbreviation list on the UNFCCC website if you ever have to negotiate a COP or indeed have to read anything about climate change. I belong, for example, to the NGO set called 'RINGOs' (Research Independent NGO) and there are also YOUNGs, TUNGOs and WANGOs to name but a few!

I enter the huge hall of the CDM plenary session hesitantly, looking at the row upon row of tables labelled for Party members; it is quite a thrill to see the entire international community spread out over this area. The Head of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), Dr Pachauri is addressing delegates on the compelling scientific evidence of 'man-made' climate change and the importance of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to limit global warming. I work out that NGOs are allowed to sit in the few unmarked chairs at the back of the hall but there are too many of us anyway so everyone has spilled out onto the floor; scribbling in notebooks or with laptops on their knees. People wander in and out constantly, take photographs, chat, even talk on their phones; such is the nature of the open sessions, where views of the parties are aired publically, more a setting out of their stalls rather than the serious negotiations, which I decide must take place behind closed doors. Still, it is very interesting to listen to the views being expressed by the different parties and already it is noticeable that emotions run high, particularly among some of the developing country alliances that are most likely to be the worst hit by climate change. A comment about the 'unfairness' of rapidly developing economies having to commit to legally binding emission reduction targets precipitates a heated statement along the lines of "who are you to talk about unfairness when our people are directly suffering the effects of climate change, to which they have not contributed at all". Getting everyone to agree on a way forward is not going to be easy.

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What does COP17 mean? - Tuesday 29 November 2011

I arrive at Johannesburg's Oliver Tambo International Airport and two things are immediately apparent; I have just stepped into summer and COP17 seems to have taken over, with welcoming billboards, special queues at customs (which were much longer than the other queues, indicating how many people were arriving for this international event) and COP17 information kiosks and assistants scattered throughout. It seems that everyone heading for the connecting flight to Durban is going to COP17, which is being held there from the 28th November to the 9th December 2011.

So what is COP17? It is the 17th annual United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP stands for 'Conference of the Parties') at which the world's governments are meeting with the aim of continuing to steer the global economy onto a low-carbon, climate-safe path. The last COP was held in Cancun, Mexico a year ago, with the significant outcome of an international agreement to collectively limit global average temperature rise to below two degrees Celsius, through voluntary pledges to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (although to date these pledges only amount to 60% of what is needed). Another significant outcome of COP16 was a pledge by developed countries to provide US$ 100 billion by 2020 (the so-called Green Fund) to enable developing countries to take action against climate change. Now, the Durban COP17 has the important and difficult task of getting everyone in the international community to agree on how to turn these good intentions into workable solutions so that they do, indeed, contribute to steering the global economy onto a low-carbon, climate-safe path.

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