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## **COP-15 in Copenhagen: How the Merging of Movements Left Civil Society Out in the Cold**

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# COP-15 in Copenhagen: How the Merging of Movements Left Civil Society Out in the Cold

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*Dana R. Fisher\**

Since its inception at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, the climate regime has been relatively inclusive of stakeholders from its many constituencies. Although it is not the most accessible of all international regimes,<sup>1</sup> it has been found to provide significantly more access to civil society actors than most.<sup>2</sup> For Fisher and Green, the climate regime has provided multiple examples of the ways civil society and developing countries experience and overcome disenfranchisement—that is “being deprived of the capability to participate and to influence agenda-setting and decision-making.”<sup>3</sup> For civil society actors particularly, avoiding disenfranchisement involves both access to the negotiations and influence within them. Though NGO observers had unlimited access to registration for the COP-15 round of negotiations, participation was significantly reduced once the negotiations began and civil society actors experienced increased disenfranchisement.

The interaction among three main forces led to the disenfranchisement of civil society at COP-15: increased registration, poor planning by the Danish organizers and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Secretariat (UNFCCC), and the merging of movements. In this piece, I discuss each in detail. I will show that, ironically and counter-intuitively, the massive expansion of civil society participation at Copenhagen was not only accompanied by civil society disenfranchisement, it actually contributed to it. This paradox raises profound questions for the practice of and research about civil society participation in international environmental negotiations. I conclude by offer-

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1. See particularly Corell and Betsill 2001.
2. For comparison between the UNFCCC and International Financial Institutions, see Fisher 2004.
3. Fisher and Green 2004, 69.

ing some thoughts on the implications of the increase in civil society disenfranchisement to the climate regime and to the study of global environmental politics.

## Increased Registration

As the COP-15 negotiations were expected to yield the next international climate agreement, applications for credentials soared. The UNFCCC has been fairly open to stakeholders: registration is open to all NGO observers and delegation size is not limited. As a result, the provisional list of participants at COP-15 reported that 30,123 people were registered. Media accounts were even higher, with the *New York Times* reporting that 45,000 people had been accredited to participate.<sup>4</sup> This increase in registration was the result of the growth in the size of delegations that had participated in earlier meetings, along with new delegations registering to participate in what was expected to be an historic round of negotiations.

This number of organizations registered to participate was unprecedented. At the COP-6 negotiations in The Hague in 2000, where the Kyoto Protocol was scheduled to be finalized, only 6,994 people registered. Prior to COP-15, the COP-13 negotiations in Bali in 2007 had had the highest number of registrants (10,828). At most negotiations, NGO observers account for about half of those participating. In Copenhagen, however, more than two-thirds of those registered (20,611 individuals) were NGO observers. Table 1 presents participation in the Conferences of the Parties since 2000.<sup>5</sup>

## Poor Planning

In addition to the significant increase in the numbers of registrants, the organizers of the conference were ill-prepared to host the high number of participants. People waited in lines for hours outside the conference hall to receive their credentials. Although the UNFCCC had significant warning about the number of people registered, the site of the conference—the Bella Center—was only able to accommodate 15,000 people. Less than two weeks before the negotiations began, the Secretariat notified participants that there would be limitations on access to registrants. The Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC distributed a letter to the designated focal points stating: “A system will be set up to regulate the participation of each organization in the conference.”<sup>6</sup> Since the letter did not go out until 25 November, it was after most people had arranged their travel to Copenhagen.

4. Rosenthal 2009, A10.

5. Data calculated from UNFCCC participants lists for each COP. Documents from which the data are drawn can be found at: [http://unfccc.int/documentation/documents/advanced\\_search/items/3594.php](http://unfccc.int/documentation/documents/advanced_search/items/3594.php), accessed 27 January 2010.

6. Letter from Yvo de Boer to focal points, 25 November 2009.

**Table 1**  
Participation in Climate Negotiations

	COP-6 (2000)	COP-7 (2001)	COP-8 (2002)	COP-9 (2003)	COP-10 (2004)	COP-11 (2005)	COP-12 (2006)	COP-13 (2007)	COP-14 (2008)	COP-15 (2009)
Total Number of Registrants	6,994	4,460	4,352	5,151	6,151	9,474	5,924	10,828	9,252	30,123
Total Number of NGO Observers	3,552	1,327	1,858	2,404	2,888	5,435	2,533	4,993	3,869	20,611
Total Number of Parties	2,195	2,412	1,456	1,931	2,210	2,804	2,344	3,508	3,958	8,041

Source: Data calculated from UNFCCC participants lists for each COP. Documents from which the data are drawn can be found at: [http://unfccc.int/documentation/documents/advanced\\_search/items/3594.php](http://unfccc.int/documentation/documents/advanced_search/items/3594.php), accessed 27 January 2010.

This “system” was only explained once the negotiations had begun. Most participants only attend the second week of the negotiations at the COPs, because that is when the ministerial level talks take place. Starting on the Tuesday of the second week, just as many observers began to arrive, intergovernmental organization (IGO) and NGO observers learned that they would need one of 7,000 secondary cards to enter the Bella Center. It is unclear exactly how these cards were distributed: some groups reported receiving cards for less than one-quarter of their delegates, while others reported receiving cards for more than half.

NGO observer access was further limited later in the second week: the UNFCCC announced that access would be reduced to 1000 accredited participants from IGOs and NGOs for Thursday and 90 for Friday. Although the NGO coalition of environmental groups—the Climate Action Network (CAN)—lobbied for more access,<sup>7</sup> only limited changes were made to this original plan. Registration for NGO observers, which was scheduled to be open throughout the COP-15 meetings, was closed permanently on Wednesday morning. Thus, many representatives of environmental groups, businesses, and researchers who had traveled to Denmark to observe the end of the negotiations were not even able to receive their credentials.

## The Merging of Movements

Beyond increased registration and poor planning, civil society itself contributed to its own disenfranchisement. As scholars have noted, civil society participation in politics involves both insider and outsider tactics.<sup>8</sup> At most climate negotiations, groups that are participating *inside* the negotiations as NGO observers will organize demonstrations to take place during the Saturday between the two weeks of negotiations.<sup>9</sup> As such, a demonstration was organized in Copenhagen on Saturday, 12 December, which had a very large turnout. While the “Human Dike” protest on the Saturday of the COP-6 negotiations in The Hague turned out 5000,<sup>10</sup> the demonstration during the Saturday of COP-15 mobilized somewhere between 60,000 and 100,000 participants.<sup>11</sup> This high turnout can be explained, in part, by the number of NGO observers at the event and the global attention paid to the Copenhagen round of negotiations. Also, this demonstration was part of an internationally coordinated Global Day of Action around climate change, which involved protest events taking place in 108 countries.<sup>12</sup> Participants in the demonstration in Copenhagen included members of groups

7. Letter from David Turnbull, director of the Climate Action Network International to the Prime Minister of Denmark and to Yvo de Boer, 16 December 2009.

8. See Keck and Sikkink 1998; and della Porta and Tarrow 2004.

9. Fisher 2004.

10. McDonald 2000, 4.

11. Zeller 2009.

12. “Global Day of Action: International Demonstrations on Climate Change, December 12th 2009,” at [www.globalclimatecampaign.org](http://www.globalclimatecampaign.org), accessed 26 December 2009.

that were participating in the negotiations as NGO observers, local environmental groups, political parties, labor unions from around the region, as well as individual citizens.

In addition, COP-15 marked the emergence of the “climate justice movement,” which mobilized activists to travel to Copenhagen specifically to participate in activism against the climate regime and global capitalism more broadly.<sup>13</sup> Groups called on activists to memorialize the tenth anniversary of the protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organization by engaging in non-violent direct action throughout the climate negotiations.<sup>14</sup> In other words, these activists did not come to Copenhagen to participate *inside* the negotiations as NGO observers, they came specifically to protest *outside*. On the first day of the high-level negotiations, a coalition of civil society groups led by Climate Justice Action and Climate Justice Now called for a protest with non-violent civil disobedience that aimed to get into the negotiations to “take over the conference for one day and transform it into a People’s Assembly.”<sup>15</sup> Although climate justice activists were unsuccessful in getting into the Bella Center, direct action erupted all over the city. Afterwards, the organizers released a press statement noting that it was a “Defining Moment for the Emerging Global Climate Justice Movement.”<sup>16</sup>

Because the call to storm the Bella Center had been posted on the internet before the negotiations began, it contributed to the decision to limit access to NGO delegations. This decision to reduce access to NGOs inadvertently helped the climate justice movement’s efforts. Justice groups courted those who had traveled to Copenhagen to participate as peaceful NGO observers inside the negotiations: by lobbying delegates, observing side events, singing protest songs in the common areas, and providing assistance to delegations from developing countries. After being shut out of the negotiations, some became willing participants of direct action outside the Bella Center. This activism contributed to the decision to block some groups from the negotiations altogether. Citing security concerns, a number of NGOs—including Friends of the Earth International (FOEI), Avaaz, and TckTckTck—had their accreditation revoked.<sup>17</sup> In fact, on 16 December, the chair of FOEI—Nnimmo Bassey—was escorted out of the Bella Center by security.<sup>18</sup>

13. See for example the websites of these two organizations: [www.climatecollective.org/en/about/](http://www.climatecollective.org/en/about/), accessed 25 December 2009; and [www.climate-justice-action.org](http://www.climate-justice-action.org), accessed 25 December 2009.

14. Lawton 2009.

15. “Reclaim Power! Pushing for Climate Justice,” at [www.climate-justice-action.org/mobilization/reclaim-power-pushing-for-climate-justice](http://www.climate-justice-action.org/mobilization/reclaim-power-pushing-for-climate-justice), accessed 25 December 2009.

16. “Mass Nonviolent Protest by North-South Climate Justice Alliances at COP 15 Marks Defining Moment for Emerging Global Climate Justice Movement,” at [www.climate-justice-action.org/news/2009/12/16/mass-nonviolent-protest-by-north-south-climate-justice-alliances/](http://www.climate-justice-action.org/news/2009/12/16/mass-nonviolent-protest-by-north-south-climate-justice-alliances/), accessed 22 December 2009; see also [www.climatecollective.org/en/start/](http://www.climatecollective.org/en/start/), accessed 25 December 2009.

17. Vidal and Watts 2009.

18. See “Getting Surreally Stupid at COP15 as the NGOs Are . . . ,” at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ce3a9crrN88](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ce3a9crrN88), accessed 21 January 2010.

## The End of Stakeholder Inclusion in the Climate Regime?

Along with the over-registration and poor planning for COP-15, the addition of the climate justice movement to the repertoire of action at this round of negotiations ended up leaving civil society out in the cold. While the climate regime has been known for its openness to civil society, UNFCCC policies regarding NGO observer access (in terms of overall numbers and the size of delegations) will certainly change after what happened in Copenhagen.

Even if the meeting had been planned to accommodate the increased participation, however, it is very likely that NGO observers would have been limited in their access to the ministerial talks. With the addition of the climate justice movement, which came to Copenhagen to protest *outside* the negotiations and try to halt the negotiations on 16 December, the climate regime is confronting the same challenges that have faced other regimes that experience extensive protests and direct action during their meetings. To ensure the safety of the Parties negotiating *inside*, the regime has little choice but to limit access to members of civil society. Ironically, the more civil society actors try to participate—and the diversity of the perspectives represented by the civil society actors involved—the less access they are likely to have.

As the world debates the implications of the outcome of COP-15 to multilateralism and global governance more broadly, there are clear implications to the role of civil society and NGO observers in these processes. Although outsider tactics are an effective means of gaining media attention, they have the unintended consequence of increasing the disenfranchisement of civil society in international regimes. The events in Copenhagen point to clear opportunities to expand the ways civil society is studied within global environmental politics. In particular, we must develop a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between participation (in terms of the numbers of NGOs and the size of the delegations) and influence in agenda-setting and decision-making. Also, research is needed to look more carefully at the role that social movements play in global environmental politics, both inside and outside of international negotiations.

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