

A Copenhagen Climate Copout?

By David J. Keeling

Despite President Obama's best efforts recently at the Copenhagen Climate Summit, a meaningful, binding agreement to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change could not be achieved. For all the political rhetoric, passionate debate, and powerful evidence from respected scientists, the realities of political geography won the day. Global decisions are still structured around the territorial state, where sovereign governments make policy decisions in the context of their local circumstances. It is true that globalization has weakened many of the barriers between states that limited trans-national trade and policy cooperation. Indeed, global communities are more integrated today than at any time in human history, yet the geography of socio-economic differences remains a powerful divisive force. Herein lies the challenge for Obama and like-minded leaders who believe that forceful, binding action on climate change is needed. How do leaders address the unequal geographies of resource consumption and environmental degradation that limit their ability to reach agreement on meaningful climate change policy?

As geographers know all too well, the human contributions to climate change, and its resulting impacts, are not distributed across the planet in a spatially even pattern. A few countries (notably China and the U.S.) generate the lion's share of harmful emissions, while consuming an unequal portion of the world's natural resources. Meanwhile, several billion people in many more countries around the world live desperate, impoverished lives, with little ability to cope with devastating droughts, fires, floods, or other impacts of climate shifts. The "tragedy of the commons" is that the majority suffer because of the actions of the minority. Yet the global system has no meaningful mechanism to hold the minority accountable for their actions - or inactions in the case of climate policy.

Meaningful climate change strategies require that individual countries look beyond their self-serving approaches to the problem. Our global environment, and the climate geographies that shape patterns of settlement, agriculture, and other human activity, must be viewed as the common heritage of humankind. Neither pollution nor fearsome storms recognize artificial political boundaries. The acid rain created by power plants in the U.S. does not stop at the Canadian border on its northeasterly journey because the Canadians do not want it! Similarly, destructive fires triggered by El Niño cycles or cataclysmic hurricanes spawned by warmer Atlantic waters do not discriminate based on territorial boundaries. The reality for humans is that climate change impacts, whatever their root cause, do not distinguish between the minority or the majority, the responsible or blameless.

Copenhagen demonstrated quite powerfully that the world's leaders have not yet come to grips with the geographic realities of climate change. Politics again trumped a reasoned, geographically aware approach to policy making. Whatever one's political opinion, level of skepticism, or concern about climate change, the undisputable fact is that change is inevitable. The impacts of climate change for humans, however, are not inevitable, but they do require leaders across the political and territorial spectrum to see beyond their sovereign boundaries. Climate change, like globalization, argues for

decision makers to think locally while acting globally. Climate impacts can be analyzed, understood, and managed at multiple scales using sound geographic methods and practices. When decisions are subsequently made about climate change policy, leaders must act locally while thinking globally, as local climate impacts are driven by regional and global conditions. This approach requires a level of geographic awareness about climate change impacts that is sadly lacking in our political leaders. Unfortunately for humankind, a disturbing level of geographic ignorance was demonstrated all too clearly in Copenhagen.

David Keeling is a member of the American Geographical Society's Writers Circle and Professor of Geography, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY 42191-1066, USA. He can be reached at david.keeling@wku.edu

587 words