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## Civil Society Actions and Reactions to COP15

Despite states' dominant role at the COP15 climate conference, civil society has been playing an increasingly prominent role in international climate negotiations. This Alert examines civil society's efforts to gain public support and influence decision-making through conventional as well as new and creative means.

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### Introduction

In the lead up to and during COP15, environmentalists and civil society organisations (CSOs) called for strong and decisive action by world leaders for a fair, ambitious and legally binding agreement. Given the dismal result from COP15, the efforts of civil society could initially seem to resemble just a talk-shop or shout-fest. However, further analysis shows that civil society efforts are in fact making in-roads in global action on climate change in various ways. This edition of the Alert examines the role of CSOs in pushing for a successful COP15 by highlighting the significance of climate communication, open campaigning, strengthened networks and alliances and notable progress in influencing formal negotiations.

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### Communicating the Climate Science

Part of the purpose of climate change communication is to build public awareness and knowledge on the impact of climate change. It is an important element in gaining public support for rigorous climate policies. Climate change communication is not a new concept, yet having witnessed public attention on a large scale in the lead-up to and during COP15, it is clear that it is playing an increasingly salient role.

Climate communication also seeks to enable society to respond effectively to reports produced by scientific communities. It helps to create greater understanding by the broader public of climate risks in order to facilitate individual and institutional changes. Given the complex nature and implications of climate change, this type of communication cuts across various sectors of society. People from various professions and walks of life have taken up the roles of climate communicators in various capacities, such as climatologists, marine scientists, social science scholars, engineers, development workers, journalists and movie producers.

Not only do they advocate greater awareness of the impact of climate change, climate communicators also publicise solutions. Others such as celebrities as well as faith and community leaders have leveraged their positions of influence or prominence to create further awareness amongst those around them. Examples include Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa, Prince Charles of England, former US Vice President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Al Gore, and Senator John Kerry from the US.



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A significant role of civil society in the lead-up to COP15 was communicating technical scientific facts on climate change and possible solutions to the average person 'on the street'. Such climate communication efforts are reflected in the '350' movement, which seeks to highlight the importance of reducing the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to a safe limit of 350 parts per million (ppm). With a current level of 387ppm, the movement advocates for policy actions which would bring the level back to 350ppm. The core 350 team, headed by Bill McKibben, an American environmentalist and writer, has sought to disseminate such information to segments of society that require further information and education on the implications of climate change and how it would affect them. As such, they have encouraged activists to reach out to a diverse array of groups such as faith-based groups, islanders, businesses, artists, athletes, schools, writers, youth, photographers, and musicians.

Scientific reports serve as points of reference for international climate negotiations. Looking at the scientific reports used as points of reference by negotiators in COP15, the Climate Justice Now! network argued that in addition to the 'Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2007 Report', there should be alternative (and the latest published) sources of scientific reports presented in the lead-up to and tabled at Copenhagen. Climate Justice Now! is a network of organisations and movements campaigning for social, ecological and gender justice in addressing climate change. This network was formed during COP13 in Bali in 2007. This network saw that the IPCC report was only based on scientific evidence up to January 2006, therefore complementary and more recent reports would provide more updated scientific information. According to Climate Justice Now, additional reports would be useful as they could exert greater pressure on governments and provide alternative solutions that have not been included on the COP15 agenda.

## Pressurising Governments, Empowering Individuals

Aside from communicating the science, campaigns have also been held that are meant to increase awareness of climate change and to pressure world leaders and climate negotiators to formulate sound and effective policies at COP15. The United Nations (UN) has played a significant role in by leading a campaign called 'Seal the Deal'. The campaign advocates the importance of leadership in 'protecting the planet, saving lives and building a more sustainable global economy'. Seal the Deal also highlighted important focus points for COP15 to the general public by:

- Ensuring awareness of individual targets by industrialised countries
- Efforts by developing countries to limit the growth of their emissions
- Ensuring proper mechanisms for climate finance
- Bolstering climate resilience of vulnerable countries and the protection of lives and livelihoods

The Seal the Deal campaign also highlighted future initiatives that are to be included in a post-2012 agreement, such as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (REDD) to complement the efforts of developed countries in reducing carbon emissions. In this regard, the UN-REDD Programme is showcased as a means of providing the 'potential to transform the forest sector in developing countries and enable climate change mitigation, poverty reduction, economic growth and the protection of biodiversity and critical ecosystems services'. Having the UN initiate a global campaign to support the Seal the Deal campaign is a positive sign that the UN seeks multi-stakeholders ownership of the COP15 process and agenda.

Many official UN side events had been organised as a means for conference delegates to further network and discuss issues. A major event held on the sidelines of COP15 was the Klimaforum09, a global climate change event that has gathered various civil society elements. It was organised by Danish along with international environmental movements and CSOs, and partly funded by the Danish government. It provided a space for constructive discussions and debates aiming to constitute a cohesive framework for a multitude of events to which citizens, the grassroots and organisations from all over the world would contribute during COP15. The main outcome of this event was 'A Peoples Declaration from Klimaforum09: System change – not climate change', signed by almost 500 organisations and continues to be open for signatories until March 2010.

This declaration calls for a just and sustainable transition of our societies to address the climate crisis. Some of the steps towards sustainable transitions include food sovereignty and ecological agriculture; domestic ownership and control of the economy; energy sovereignty; ecological planning of urban and rural zones; education science and cultural institutions; and an end to militarism and wars (see Figure 1). It seeks a community-based approach that will empower local communities in the decision-making process so that social cohesion, democratic participation, economic accountability, and ecological responsibility could be attained. The declaration also endorses regional and international cooperation directly among sub-national actors on various levels.

*Figure 1 Concrete steps towards sustainable transition based on the Klimaforum09 declaration*

**Food sovereignty and ecological agriculture:** Upholding the rights of people, communities, and countries to determine their own systems of production that includes farming, fishing, food, forestry, and land policies that are ecologically, socially, economically, and culturally appropriate to the circumstances. Includes guaranteed people's, especially women's, access to and control over productive resources.

**Democratic ownership and control of economy:** The re-organisation of society's productive units around more democratic forms of ownership and management, in order to meet people's basic needs. Public policy must make sure that the financial system serves public interests and channel resources for the sustainable transformation of industry, agriculture, and services.

**Energy sovereignty:** A dramatic reduction of energy consumption especially in the more affluent countries, combined with a mix of renewable and public energy sources; the development of off-the-grid electricity distribution to secure energy supplies to communities; and public ownership of the grid.

**Ecological planning of urban and rural zones:** The aim is a radical reduction in the inputs of energy and resources and the outputs of waste and pollution, while encouraging locally based supply of basic needs of the citizens.

**Education, science and cultural institutions:** Re-orientate public research and education to meet the needs of people and the environment, rather than the present bias for developing commercially profitable and proprietary technologies. Fair and just exchange of appropriate technologies, traditional knowledge, and indigenous innovative practices and ideas between countries should be encouraged.

**An end to militarism and wars:** The present fossil fuel-based development model leads to violence, war, and military conflict over control of energy, land, water, and other natural resources. Trillions of dollars are spent on the military-industrial complex, thus wasting enormous material and human resources, which should instead be devoted to implementing a sustainable transition.

*Source:* 'A Peoples Declaration from Klimaforum09: System change – not climate change'. Available at <<http://www.klimaforum09.org/Declaration?lang=en>>.

Apart from official UN side events, several other events organised by civil society have taken place outside the Bella Center, the main venue of the conference. Open campaigning had once again allowed the 350 movement to generate mass support and keep up the momentum since the International Day of Climate Action held in October 2009, which was followed up with a worldwide peaceful vigil on 12 December. Support for their cause resulted in over 3,000 vigils being organised worldwide. This was yet another signal to governments that civil society groups wanted change and the desire for change was not confined to areas around the Bella Center, but rather around the world.

Nevertheless, certain civil society initiatives proved discomfoting for government officials. Greenpeace, known for dramatic displays of protest, had successfully gate crashed a royal banquet held at the Danish parliament. Two of their activists, one dressed in a tuxedo and

the other in a red silk ball gown, unfurled their banners which read 'Politicians Talk, Leaders Act' in front of members of the press in the lobby of the Danish Parliament, before being whisked away by security personnel. One could argue that despite breaching security cordons and running the risk of detention in jail for several days, such displays of protest have been peaceful. Moreover, while such initiatives – in the worst case scenario – may have an insignificant impact on the decisions taken by government officials, it does however act as a source of motivation for CSOs to continue to apply pressure on governments and to increase community mobilisation to act.

Other CSOs have attempted more confrontational displays of protest, perhaps as a result of the increasingly dismal progress of the UNFCCC talks. Activists from the Climate Justice Action and Climate Justice Now! networks, for instance, organised a protest dubbed 'Reclaim the Power'. Organisers called for this confrontational mass action of civil disobedience where organisers sought to march to the Bella Center with the intention of taking over the conference for a day and to form a people's assembly. The result of the march was limited and unfortunately turned violent, and was successful only in delaying conference proceedings.

Climate activists also expressed disappointment with the heavy-handed security measures. Hence, while it may be upsetting that civil society had been given limited real space (vis-a-vis virtual space) to express their views, this does not discount the fact that some CSOs need to rethink their strategy. Some CSOs have yet to understand the importance of pragmatic engagement via cordial channels, rather than resorting to public contestation.

The use of traditional and new media was also significant in pressuring governments. Pressure even came from members of the media themselves, who came together to show their support for the UN's efforts in addressing climate change. The 'Hopenhagen' campaign was created by members of advertising, marketing and communications industries to further build the momentum required to get to a strong deal at COP15, i.e. an agreement at Copenhagen which would have been crucial in providing hope for ensuring a sustainable planet for all. A second initiative undertaken by the media was the decision of 56 newspapers worldwide to publish a common editorial in the lead-up to COP15 in 20 languages. According to *The Guardian's* editor-in-chief, Alan Rusbridger, this was something novel that newspapers had not executed previously and was a reflection of their global solidarity in rallying support for climate change issues. Thus, CSOs used the media to put pressure on governments by highlighting their strength in numbers.



Source: kk+ @ flickr. Available at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/kk/4180899303/sizes/l/in/set-72157622857433731/>.

Open campaigning and CSOs side events, in particular, have been the primary tools used to increase the level of interaction and collaboration amongst CSOs across various sectors worldwide. In doing so, there have been several positive developments. Firstly, open campaigning and side events allowed CSOs to streamline their arguments and objectives in the lead up to COP15. Oxfam, an international non-governmental organisation, stated that politically, Copenhagen has provided an opportunity for civil society, unions and progressive business to build new alliances throughout 2009, demanding conclusive action at COP15. Despite the differences in approaches and expertise amongst various CSOs, these groups have been able to rally behind a common objective – the demand for a Fair, Ambitious and Binding (FAB) treaty.

The demand for a FAB treaty has been strongly advocated by 'tckctck.org' – a global alliance of various international and non-governmental organisations – in counting down to COP15. While these objectives were not met at the conference, the FAB treaty does provide a benchmark of what is expected of government officials as a result of their negotiations (see Figure 2). The pressure to meet these concerns are increasing as continued awareness building on climate change means that more citizens are carefully watching government actions at forthcoming international negotiations. This keeps the latter in check and accountable for success or failure in effectively addressing climate change issues.

Figure 2 The principles of a FAB treaty

### What is a Fair, Ambitious and Binding (FAB) Treaty?

#### Fair

- Reduce developed country emissions by at least 40 per cent by 2020
- Enable and support poor countries to adapt to the worst consequences of the climate crisis, reduce their emissions and ensure technology sharing, including through the provision of sufficient public funds
- Protect marginalised communities in rich and poor countries

#### Ambitious

- Ensure that global greenhouse emissions peak no later than 2015 and then decline steeply on a pathway to ensure concentrations of less than 350ppm in the atmosphere
- Create a pathway to clean jobs and clean energy for all
- Establish necessary conditions for a sustainable and prosperous future for people, flora and fauna

#### Binding

- Agree to a legally binding international agreement that can be verified and enforced

Source: tckctck.org website. Available at <http://www.tckctck.org>.

Open campaigning has also played a critical role in mobilising and empowering people to take action for a global cause. For instance,

open campaigning was highly significant for the 350 movement as it resulted in 5,200 events organised in 181 countries in commemoration of the International Day of Climate Action. A common theme at these events was to display the number 350 as a symbolic gesture of their support in the fight against climate change. Another initiative was Earth Hour, in which people the world over were encouraged to turn off their lights for one hour at a designated time and date. While such mass participation peaceful protests or symbolic action have been a common strategy used by CSOs, the reach of these events have been far more extensive. Where previously other types of actions would have been limited to a specific local area, open campaigning has allowed such activities to be conducted on a global scale. Moreover, such events also reflect the power of numbers, and as such have become a means of encouraging people: That each small action taken will have an impact, as they are inevitably part of the larger scheme of things.

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## Influencing the Negotiation?

Looking at the history of international meetings, states continue to be the dominant actors in formal negotiations, leaving CSOs on the sidelines. However, during COP15, CSOs attempted to influence the negotiation process through different strategies. Their representatives were granted observer status during COP15 proceedings, in which they had a chance to lobby official delegates on the sidelines. In addition, they were also provided with two-minute interventions at allocated times during plenary sessions of the conference. These interventions are often joint statements representing the views of various groups, such as youth, islanders and business communities. CSOs had also been active in providing information, as well as supplementary drafts of negotiating text, to the official delegations during the lead-up to COP15. During COP15, CSO representatives provided 'backdoor' consultation to the climate negotiators in response to the ongoing negotiations. The Climate Action Network argued that the role of non-governmental organisations is to provide oversight to negotiations by ensuring accountability and transparency during the process. These activities indicate an increasing involvement of civil society in formal climate negotiations. Unfortunately, the UN and the Danish government have had to restrict the access of most observers during the final days of the negotiations for security reasons. The UN and Danish officials who organised COP15 acknowledged the importance of CSOs in pressuring delegates, but had also treaded cautiously to avoid disruption to the talks.



Source: [kk+ @ flickr](#). Available at

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/kk/4180899303/sizes/l/in/set-72157622857433731/>.

A more indirect way to influence the negotiators was the rapid response team set up by Greenpeace and its partners in [tckctck.org](#), who carried out impromptu demonstrations inside the Bella Center corresponding with developments in negotiations inside the plenary hall. Kumi Naido, the Executive Director of Greenpeace International, argued that the idea was to have negotiators walking past displays and demonstrations to experience direct responses from civil society. There was also a plethora of displays of support for action inside the Bella Center where the COP15 took place, with 200 exhibition stands allocated placing at the entrance area of the Center.

Ian Fry, a Tuvalu negotiator, argued that activist support helped his ability to negotiate by highlighting issues and concerns to other delegates and the public. This includes the impromptu demonstration held outside the plenary hall. However, he further stated that the campaigns and demonstrations organised during the

COP15 'reflected much broader concerns about climate change than the Danish government was willing to acknowledge'. On the other hand, Rajendra Pachauri, Chair of the IPCC, argued that despite civil society's impressive mobilisation to pressure governments in the lead-up to Copenhagen, he doubted that it had any impact on negotiators and world leaders. COP15 once again proved that states continue to dominate the process and the substance of negotiations.

In international climate negotiations, small states often did not have adequate representation, mostly due to budget constraints and/or inadequate levels of expertise on the issue. Civil society has increasingly played a more direct and prominent role in representing the interests of these small states. For example, Ian Fry was a former climate change activist from Australia who used to work for Earth Negotiations Bulletin and Greenpeace; he became Tuvalu's international environment adviser and negotiator at COP15 due to his expertise. This indicates that climate communicators increasingly play an effective role in climate negotiations.

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## After COP15's failure: Opportunities and challenges that face the international community in addressing climate change

Given the dismal outcome of COP15, it would seem as if the efforts of civil society have come to naught. Yet, on the contrary, many members of civil society have noted that they have benefited from the process itself. Firstly, it has allowed various members of civil society to collaborate and make their opinions heard efficiently. The Bella Center provided CSOs with an excellent opportunity to network and collaborate with each other, as well as engage with official negotiators regarding specific issues. According to Katherine Goldstein, editor of the *Huffington Post's* 'Green' page, the 'new media, grassroots activists, ordinary people and citizen journalists worked together in inspired ways to get the Copenhagen story out'. Moreover, opportunities to deliver interjections during COP15 sessions itself were significant means of officially voicing civil society opinions to world leaders.

Secondly, CSOs are complementing their efforts at the international level with initiatives targeting decision-makers at local and national levels. According to the World Wildlife Fund International, this provides an opportunity for government at national and local levels, along with business and local communities, to build a bottom-up solution to climate change. Hence, despite the shortcomings in the Copenhagen Accord, civil society is working towards precipitating further substantial change amongst those that require it the most.

Thirdly, these efforts have cultivated increased support for the movement and the willingness to see action. About halfway through the Copenhagen climate summit, for instance, the global coalition [tckctck.org](#) hit the 15 million mark for their 'calls for climate action'. In addition, activists from the 350 movement noted that UN delegates had expressed their gratitude for the movement's efforts, which had

'altered both the tone and substance of the negotiations' during COP15, according to the 350 website. Based on this fact, even the dismal outcome of COP15 has given members of civil society greater motivation to continue their efforts of pushing for a FAB treaty by COP16 in Mexico City.

CSOs should continue to engage on climate policies on different levels with multi-stakeholder involvement. Oxfam argued that sustained and focused engagement should continue at political, scientific, technical and public levels. CSOs need to continue highlighting poverty and environmental impacts of climate change, as well as the issue of climate justice to build wider public awareness and also to put pressure on policy makers. Observing how governments are still focused on their national interests, rather than agreeing on a FAB treaty, during the course of COP15, Oxfam noted that the role of civil society should be to continue 'escorting' the negotiation process throughout the year.

On another note, Andrew Pendleton, a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Public Policy Research, argued that one of the important lessons to be learnt from the failure of COP15 to produce a FAB agreement was the failure of the climate change campaign to raise greater public awareness. Similarly, Matthew C. Nisbet, an assistant professor at the American University School of Communication, argued that there is a need to reframe climate change communication in a way that would empower the public to engage in policymaking and pursue major policy changes. In other words, the method of making climate change policy more accessible to a greater variety of people needs greater deliberation, and should involve all stakeholders.

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## Conclusion

In light of developments within civil society circles, in particular the use of new media in precipitating and expediting the spread of messages for coordinated action, we can clearly expect more efforts embodying the principle that 'when the people lead, leaders follow'. Civil society can endorse all sectors to take ownership of climate change issues, thus coming up with real and fair solutions. With over half the world's population under the age of 30 – who are filled with energy and passion to secure a sustainable future – it would be increasingly difficult for world leaders to ignore civil society's main post-COP15 message: 'You're not done yet. And neither are we.'

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#### About the Centre:

The Centre for NTS Studies was inaugurated by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretary-General Dr Surin Pitsuwan in May 2008. The Centre maintains research in the fields of Climate Change, Energy Security, Health Security, as well as Internal and Cross Border Conflict. It produces policy-relevant analyses aimed at furthering awareness and building capacity to address NTS issues and challenges in the Asia Pacific region and beyond. The Centre also provides a platform for scholars and policymakers within and outside Asia to discuss and analyse NTS issues in the region.

In 2009, the Centre was chosen by the MacArthur Foundation as a lead institution for the MacArthur Asia Security Initiative, to develop policy research capacity and recommend policies on the critical security challenges facing the Asia-Pacific.

The Centre is also a founding member and the Secretariat for the Consortium of Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies in Asia (NTS-Asia). More information on the Centre can be found at [www.rsis.edu.sg/nts](http://www.rsis.edu.sg/nts)