

Copenhagen Reflection

The simulation was exhausting. In many ways, this was both expected and unexpected.

It was unexpected that so much chaos ensued. While I anticipated some level of conflict and messiness, I did not imagine that the conference would devolve into a shouting match at times. In general, I was expecting at least some level of civility, and more room for negotiation and consensus. In addition, the multiplicity of interests was also slightly unexpected. I had naively thought that there would generally be two camps: those for a strong treaty and those not. In reality, lines were not so clearly drawn and people who were aligned on some aspects were not on others. All of this made settling on a treaty that much harder.

However, in retrospect, this was not surprising. After all, we have learned in IR theory that each state pursues its own interests. That the big powers like China and US managed to get their way is thus to be expected. The simulation was a good example of a failure to organise collective action. It supports Mancur Olson's thesis that individuals will not rationally act to contribute to a public good. Ultimately, states only supported what would fulfil their own objectives. Indeed, on a more fundamental level, there was significant disagreement on *what* this public good even is. Brazil focused on forests, the LDCs focused on aid for survival, the European states were more concerned with having some sort of agreement to reduce emissions, while climate change deniers did not even see the need for a good.

Nevertheless, we see some traces of Ostrom's ideas. After all, some states did agree to some kind of collective action. Conditional co-operators played a role in this. For instance, the US was first to offer 100 billion USD in aid, which prompted other developed nations to raise their commitments as well. The US also acted as a willing punisher, calling out the latter for not contributing enough. Willing punishers were also found in the LDCs, who openly lambasted developed nations whom they felt were not contributing enough. In sum, however, the result still represented a weak collective action regime.

Such an outcome casts a pessimistic shadow over the idea of global governance. While I am personally a firm believer of ideas and normative influence, the simulation made it clear that ultimately national interests still play a much larger role. Even though some of the developed nations did seek to reach a treaty that was legal, equitable, and transparent, in the end we were forced to settle for a weak treaty that excluded the LDCs. My own objective also somewhat shifted through the simulation. Before it began, I saw the LDCs and the green NGOs as possible allies in pushing for a strong legal treaty. However, being in the role of both Denmark and the Chair, I soon found that my objectives did not match theirs. Indeed, especially towards the end, the NGOs and the LDCs became more and more of a hindrance to my own goal – which changed from pushing for a strong legal treaty to simply settling for getting some kind of treaty signed that included US, China, and India. That perhaps is the best example of why the conference was disappointing – because I myself was forced to forsake more idealistic goals for the sake of my own interest, and in the face of big power pressure. It also showed that while consensus sounds great, it is often an obstacle to action – hence issues of exclusivity, big power hegemony, and neocolonialism. It is easy to critique these as an academic, but it is evidently hard to avoid such pitfalls in real life.

While it feels like the simulation could not have gone any other way (especially since the actual Copenhagen Conference turned out remarkably similarly – I am not sure if that speaks well or badly of us), I wonder if some factors made it more or less likely. For one, I think personality definitely

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made a difference. The negotiations were dominated by certain people not simply due to their role, but also their character. For instance, Francesco as Maldives. On the other hand, certain delegates, while representing powerful entities in real life, failed to have an equal presence, in my opinion. In this case, I am thinking of some of the European states. Since these were, broadly speaking, my allies in the conference, their passivity might have made attaining my objectives more difficult. The European faction soon disintegrated, with most of them very quickly going along with US and China.

Secondly, I wonder if certain things which were left out of the simulation would have made a difference. Time, for instance, was surely much shorter for us. I believe the time crunch at the end of the three hours, and our collective reluctance to continue the next week, helped in forcing out a treaty. In addition, I imagine that in real life, the devil would be in the details. Being able to write up a more nuanced treaty might have made it easier to reach one that people would be agreeable with.

Nonetheless, if the simulation made anything clear, it is that global governance in the area of climate change is a tough nut to crack. Even the Paris Agreement of 2015, despite some improvements, is still viewed with scepticism by some. Notably, it is also non-binding and keeps the aim of 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels, which might not be that safe. Meanwhile, a recent article revealed that major banks have pumped 1.6 trillion into fossil fuels over the past few years. This sounds surprising in the face of a rise in public awareness and moral outrage. But the simulation showed that moral arguments hold little currency in such negotiations. In the end, it is power and money that matter. No amount of protesting by Greenpeace, or moralising by the LDCs, managed to sway the other players in single-mindedly pursuing their pre-set objectives.

It is these objectives that must change. As long as we keep thinking in dollars and cents, in quid-pro-quo terms, and as individual states in competition with each other, effective collective action will elude us. Although I have mentioned my disillusionment, I still maintain some optimism. Taking a long view of history, global collective action has progressed tremendously, notably in areas such as security, trade, and health. We also forget that from 1987 onwards, the Montreal Protocol has successfully limited the use of chlorofluorocarbons.

I believe that as battling climate change becomes more cemented as a normal political objective, and as perspectives shift from being state-centric to being more global, collective action on the issue will become more likely. Norm entrepreneurs at the level of states or individual policymakers will play an important role in this. European states are a good example of the former, while Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is a recent example of the latter. However, the voice of the people will also have a role in pushing climate change to become a mainstream political issue alongside (or above) other traditional issues like economics. This can be done through lobbying, voting, arts, conversations, and consumption patterns. Individuals like Greta Thunberg are leading the way, but it is the responsibility of all. Speed would be the greatest challenge here, since a gradual change will not be sufficient. For such a sea-change to occur in a short period of time, everyone needs to act. If we want collective action, we must remember that we too, are part of that collective.