

COP 21 Yes-DC (Emmet Sharkey)

First of all I would like to thank YES-DC for the amazing opportunity to experience, first hand, the most important COP in recent years. For the several years that I have been following the UNFCCC negotiations I have hoped to make it to such an event, so I was very lucky that with YES-DC I was able to make it happen.

I spent two weeks in Paris and attended every day except for the first as I arrived late in the evening. The first day was quite overwhelming! I started by visiting the Climate Generations area which is open to the public. Here I found some quite interesting exhibitions and events, but it was nothing compared to the main area which we were able to access with our observer passes. This area was really massive, with several large exhibition halls linked by a covered walkway, aptly named the Champs Elysees! On arrival I was happy to receive quite a few freebies, including the usual branded pens and stationary, but more interestingly a reusable COP21 water bottle (very useful given the fresh water fountains all around the grounds) and a bag made from a recycled sweater. The most practical item I received however, was the Navigo travel pass which enabled free transport on the entire urban transport network of the city.

The venue was quite evenly divided in the middle, with the observer and press areas on one side and the Country pavilions and negotiating rooms on the other. It was interesting to note the contrasting appearance of the casually dressed observers and the formally attired party delegations. The observer area felt like a very large exhibition in its own right, with every major IGO and NGO represented with a small booth where you could talk to employees, gaining insight into their work and also information about their events taking place over the two weeks. This was a real highlight for me and I had interesting conversations at the International Energy Agency and REN 21 stands in particular. It was in this area that I spent most of my time as surrounding the exhibition area were 10 large meeting rooms which all had talks scheduled from morning to evening each day. A schedule for these meetings was published online and was so extensive that, despite trying to be selective about what I attended, I ended up running from room to room all day. The topics ranged across all areas of the climate negotiations from Carbon trading to peasant agriculture to climate migration. I mostly attended those about GHG mitigation, particularly Renewable energy deployment. I found these presentations hugely informative and they were a highlight of the event for me. The level of speakers was very high and among many politicians and experts, I was lucky enough to listen to Al Gore and Nick Stern (of the Stern report).

As for the negotiations themselves, access could be had via overflow rooms where you could follow the progress on large screens. I had been warned that these discussions could be quite tedious as the negotiators can be very pedantic about the lexical aspects of the draft text. Despite this, I still found it vastly fascinating and even sometimes entertaining. An example being Saudi Arabia favouring the use of "welcomes" rather than "invites". This was rejected by the chairman which resulted in a lengthy monologue from the, admittedly highly impressive, Saudi negotiator. He, "despite not being a native speaker", eloquently argued that welcomes could be used to imply both a future and past action, before asking his lawyer behind him whether it made any difference to the legal meaning of the sentence, it did not and he quickly let it go. Despite this seeming innocent, what I saw here was a country at the same time flexing its muscles and highlighting the "concessions" it was willing to make.

Overall I found the experience fascinating and encouraging. It was a great relief when at the end a text was adopted and despite criticism from some, I see it as a significant milestone and a floor of ambition which can now be built upon going forward. For anyone with an interest in international climate negotiations attending a COP is a must!

