

## **Copenhagen Report: Climate Change Issues Are Alive and Well**

Friday, February 19, at noon, the Environment & Energy Task Force devoted its regular monthly meeting to exploring a question on all our minds: What actually happened at the December 2009 United Nations conference in Copenhagen, and how do its results affect the actions the United States might take in the future? More than 30 people attended the event in the ballroom, listening to the presenters, and partaking of a delicious buffet lunch. The format was intentionally informal: introductions were kept to a minimum and questions from the floor were made vocally rather than written on cards.

The four panelists, each of whom has been actively involved in climate change activities, were **Jake Schmidt**, International Climate Policy Director, Natural Resources Defense Council; **Vera Eidelman**, Research Assistant in the International Economics Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Managing Editor of the Endowment's International Economics Bulletin; and **Erin O'Sullivan** and **Jenny Cooper**, staff members of the Environmental Defense Fund. It should be noted that the opinions they presented were their own, and did not represent the positions of the EDF. Jake, Erin and Jenny attended the Copenhagen conference.

All four panelists agreed that, despite the generally negative and dismissive accounts in the press, the Copenhagen conference had, on the whole, substantially positive consequences. Jake underlined this positive assessment by listing four ways in which the Copenhagen Conference had raised hopes for an international agreement:

1. Greatly increased the scale of interest in and discussion about climate change issues around the world;
2. Brought together Heads of State (as distinct from their diplomatic emissaries) to meet each other, learn about their particular domestic needs, and engage in person-to-person negotiations;
3. Established the requirement that nations commit to transparency about their progress in reaching the emission-reduction goals to which they had committed themselves (by, for example, obliging them to submit a progress report every two years); and
4. Pledged unusually generous financial arrangements (such as a "prompt start fund" and a \$100-billion-a-year grant to developing countries, subject to certain conditions) to enable poor nations and others with particular needs

to act immediately on implementing their new energy commitments and to mitigate and adjust to the damaging effects of climate change on their natural resources.

Another very positive feature coming out of Copenhagen, again not commonly noted in the press, is the significant role President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton played in the final days. Jake said that until the American Heads of State arrived in Copenhagen, the Conference was all but dead, bogged down in gridlock and getting nowhere. President Obama and Secretary Clinton saved the day by immediately injecting themselves into the negotiations, “professionally and capably” assisting nations to make deals and bringing faltering leaders to a compromise.

The three other panelists added to the perspective laid out by Jake Schmidt. They were particularly concerned about the question: Where do we go from here? Vera met with the members of the G20 countries to talk about the possibilities of getting together on a number of more scaled-down issues, to avoid the difficulties of obtaining a consensus on a whole complex package of decisions involved in an international climate change agreement. Erin, as a member of the SustainUS youth delegation, spoke for the youth activists at the Conference, describing their heartbreak at the failure to achieve a treaty and appealing to us at the Club to reach out to young people in forming coalitions to keep alive the momentum for climate change activism. And Jenny, a John Gardner Public Service Fellow, spoke of the need to educate the public about the strong link between a healthy, sustainable environment and a vibrant cohesive society. She observed that the continued skepticism about climate change among Americans might be fanned by the media’s practice of treating the topic as a philosophical issue requiring “balanced” presentation (giving equal weight to the naysayers as well as the believers in climate change) rather than as a condition defined by scientific evidence.

Altogether, the event was lively and informative. It points to another way in which the WNDC can broaden its outreach to the community and share discussion of significant current events.

Respectively submitted,  
Alice Day  
Chair, Environment & Energy Task Force

