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World Climate Summit Reflection

It’s astounding to hear that if the world continues as it is in emitting greenhouse gasses by the year 2100 there won’t be much of a planet left to live on. Quite honestly it’s also scary to hear this and to picture a world that has been ruined by humans eighty years from now is hard to imagine but will be the reality if something isn’t changed. It’s clear after our UN climate simulation that climate change and global warming need collective action, but can’t become a collective action problem. This exercise opened my eyes to the difficulty of negotiating and collaborating on a global scale. Throughout the UN climate simulation, some of the key themes I learned more about climate change were the difficulties to negotiate because of environmental colonialism and inequality, that climate change has turned into a collective action problem, and the role of sustainable development in the future.

Climate change is looked at as this never-ending dilemma that seems to have no one right answer. It was an interesting experience to be a part of a UN climate simulation as it showed me just how much rides on these summits. One of the key things I learned was just how difficult and frustrating these summits can be. Being apart of China was a difficult situation throughout the simulation because on the one hand China having one of the largest economies in the world meant that a lot of other countries were looking at us and basing their contribution to the climate fund on our decisions. But on the other hand, I felt like a lot of other countries was overlooking the fact that China is still a developing country and has one of the lower GDPPP so making a large contribution to the fund could have devastated our economy. This was especially frustrating at the end of the simulation when everyone was bashing on China for not contributing more to the fund. One thing I realized was just how much pressure and patience are needed at these summits because your decision will affect the entire country. During the second negotiation stage, I had sat in on the conversation between India and the EU. With India not budging in any aspects, frustrating everyone in the room, it made me think of using force to have some of these other countries cooperate more. While this was obviously not a great idea, I realized just how careful and cautious countries have to be in these summits so as not to start a war or cause bad relationships with other countries. But after my experience in the UN climate simulation, it did give me hope to know that countries across the world are coming together to try and combat this problem going forward and the people representing them are a lot more educated than I am.

One of the biggest problems that we faced throughout the simulation was trying to figure out how to keep China’s economy growing while transitioning to sustainable development, which is the key to our future. Sustainable development is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (19). The three dimensions of ecological sustainability, economic opportunity, and social inclusion make up sustainable development (3). In order to have a future for future generations, it’s necessary that sustainable development is developed throughout the world. As China, our idea for transitioning to sustainable development and cleaner energy was to promote afforestation, to create more green spaces, and create taxes and subsidies that encourage companies to switch to solar energy and wind turbines which are examples of sustainable development. In order for countries to make this switch, it starts with the government, with Robertson saying, “Sustainable development will need to involve shared, democratic governance with additional emphasis on local ecosystems, local economies, and local culture” (58). Meaning mass production needs to be a thing of the past and instead there should be an emphasis on local production and consumption going forward.

While sustainable development is the key to the future, the idea of collective action problems would make it difficult for countries to collaborate in the transition. Garret Hardin wrote an article called “The Tragedy of the Commons” which is used today as a metaphor for the problems of overuse and degradation of natural resources (61). The article describes herdsmen sharing a common pasture, in which each herdsman benefits by adding animals to their herd, but by doing so they ruin the pasture. This metaphor can be linked to today’s collective action problems of overfishing and deforestation. The act of fishing in itself may not be bad for the environment, but collectively this can lead to fish not being able to sustain themselves, and when groups try and solve a collective action problem it usually fails due to personal interest. Throughout my experience in the UN simulation, it’s clear that climate change needs collective action from across the world in order for us to live past 2100, but it looks to be a collective action problem because many countries have not upheld their pledges at the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015.

One thing I had never really given much thought to until the UN simulation were the effects of environmental colonialism and inequality. If you look at the developed and developing countries today and their ability to combat climate change there’s a clear correlation: colonialism. After hundreds of years of colonialism and vital resources being taken from countries in Africa and other still developing countries while their economy couldn’t develop it’s no wonder, these countries are having trouble combating climate change. Robertson brings up the modern day version of colonialism with the term “land grabbing,” which is “affluent countries with insufficient land or water, plus corporations and speculators looking for profits, lease or buy up huge blocks of land in porter countries (60). Robertson says that these practices result in greater inequality and food insecurity because land grabs lead to industrial monoculture production and often deforestation, accelerating the destruction of the ecosystem and increasing the emission of greenhouse gasses in these poor countries (60). These corporations and countries are taking vital resources from poorer countries making it even harder for them to develop while contributing to the acceleration of global warming and climate change.

A world tarnished by humans and left to only humans being able to save it has lead us to where we are now, with a lot of talk being done that’s not backed by actions. The future depends on the country’s being able to come together to start the transition to sustainable development while providing help to the countries that have been affected by colonialism and can’t make this transition on their own. The future of the planet does look dark, but the UN simulation provided me with hope and a sense of security knowing that countries are coming together and discussing what need’s to be done to ensure the safety of future generations.

Works Cited

Robertson, Margaret. *Sustainability Principles and Practice*, Second Edition. Routledge, 2017.