**Learning from COP25 – Kat Jones, SCCS manager**

Spending a full two weeks at COP25 has been extremely useful learning experience. Coming to COP and how it works completely new has, strangely, seemed a great advantage in getting my head around the lessons to learn. This is obviously my experience from one COP so it will be good to hear whether these points chime for those COP veterans we have within the coalition and hopefully don’t seem too naïve. I hope that this set of observations, and those of others, can help SCCS plan what our most effective strategy for interaction at COP26 is.

**Everyone is tired all the time:**

Everyone at COP - both civil-society groups and delegations, with their negotiators, advisors, and UN staff, are extremely tired all the time. The schedule is gruelling with some NGOs with daily briefings at 730am and activities and meetings running to late evening. Negotiators can be working until 3 in the morning regularly even before COP officially starts – they are in the building two weeks before the rest of us arrive working on text (and before that they have the pre-COP). This situation favours the large delegations, where people can rest, as they can work around the clock if needed. You see people sleeping in meetings, on chairs and on the floor. The interfaith chaplaincy room had been taken over by negotiators sleeping.

In addition to this there is a level of emotional exhaustion I have seen (and experienced), especially among young people, indigenous groups and those parts of civil society taking part in campaigns and actions. The emotional strain of trying to bring the voice of the real world into this space is very real, and I saw the pain and distress it causes in a number of places: during the removal of around 200 protestors taking part in an unauthorised action, and in the voices of indigenous young people from the pacific meeting to share their COP experience.

**The COP space is a desert for the soul.**

Despite the organisers putting up the odd tree, and houseplant, inside the aircraft hangar-sized halls, the space has no natural light, no natural air, has terrible acoustics, and is full of shiny corporate-style communications. There is an almost complete disconnect with the real world which, I think, prevents the kind of atmosphere that would be conducive to progress on moving forward together as the earth’s people, on the climate crisis. Many people barely leave the space the whole two weeks, travelling in the dark on the metro from hotel to COP and back, seeing nothing of the city they are in, or the world they are seeking to preserve through their work at COP. We could be anywhere.

In this context, really small rays of light into the space can have a disproportionate effect. For example, the personal stories told by those affected by climate change from global south and indigenous groups, the actions that happen regularly around the Halls. And, most striking for me, the injection of an element of arts and culture into the space by the Pacific Nations Pavilion. This pavilion seems to be the only one to have brought artists with them and the effect that this has is electric. The lead artist of the small group – drummer, singer, poet, storyteller - told me that after he had been drumming to welcome people to a meeting, a negotiator had come up to him in tears thanking him for his intervention. Small things like this really can make a massive difference. In addition to that, the appearance of a piper on the last day piping the UK delegation to the handover ceremony was another moment that drew the crowds and lifted the spirits.

Given that we had already highlighted that one of the key themes that we want our work round the COP to encompass was ‘telling stories and singing songs’, it was really striking to me how effective this can be within the space. Informal chats I had with folks who have been to many a COP, agreed that this could be a transformative thing within the space.

**No-one can find out what is going on.**

There is a COP website and the [programme](https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/Daily%20Programme_Madrid2019-OD-20191213-en.pdf) for the main UNFCCC events and negotiations is only published the evening before in the form of a long pdf.

The official side events (taking place in UNFCCC rooms) are in a long [web-table](https://seors.unfccc.int/applications/seors/reports/events_list.html) searchable by subject matter. But the scores of pavilions each hold speak events with hundreds going on each day and these are almost impossible to find out what is going on except by word of mouth. You need to go to [a website](https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/conferences/un-climate-change-conference-december-2019/events/pavilions-at-cop-25) and search through each one individually.

The COP [website](https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/conferences/un-climate-change-conference-december-2019/events-at-cop-25#mandated-and-related-events) links to all 14 different places you can find out about what is going on at COP (with one of the links being links to each pavilion in turn so you would need to sort through *33 additional individual websites* to see what was on in every pavilion).

The outcome of it being hard to find out what is going on means that people tend to go only to events that they hear about from colleagues by word of mouth or via networks, and these are likely to be within their own area of work or sphere. There is very little mixing so events are reinforcing of standpoints, not creating points to come to shared understandings. From what I hear – the ‘paperless’ COP this year has exacerbated this problem of finding information.

**Scotland’s Story has real traction**

In a world where there really seems to be race to the bottom in terms of ambition, and as there started to be a real glum-ness setting in at COP in week two about what could be achieved, I found that Scotland’s story had real traction. The story of the way that civil society, working together, has been able to create real ambition in our climate legislation. Many people did not realise that Scotland has a target of 75% by 2030 and were delighted when they heard, an MP from Canada’s green party surprised me by telling me that Canada is still *17% above* 1990 levels. We really do need to model ambition for COP26, while also using the opportunity to get our government to start acting now on emissions reductions and stopping immediately activities that lock carbon emissions in for decades.

**Isolation: Inside – Outside**

The inside of the COP is an extremely isolated place – as expressed previously, most people are in a bubble for the entire 12 days, away from family, travelling from hotel room on subway and straight to COP and back. Many people I spoke to hadn’t even been out to the ‘Green Zone’ in an adjacent part of the same building, which is set up for visitors (especially schools and the general public of Madrid). Virtually no one had been the Social Summit, except some dedicated civil society folks, which was 45 minutes by metro. Even within the building people don’t hear about things – I spoke to several people that didn’t realise that all Observer Badges were suspended for entry after an unauthorised protest that led to the ejection of 200 people. This sense of isolation, I felt, takes people out of the reality of what they are trying to achieve in the space, and many people I spoke to wanted to see more connection between inside and outside the COP.

**There are amazing people at COP**

When you do get to start up a conversation with someone at COP, you find people with amazing approaches, ideas, experience and connections. My experience was that almost every time I managed to engage someone in conversation, I found they added huge insight into my thinking, were doing a really relevant piece of work for us to link into, offered useful contacts or helped me distil some kind of idea. The issue is getting to start those conversations in the first place. Sometimes it’s someone you sit next to in a talk – if you are the kind of person who introduces yourself (which I am) – or your eyes meet while fighting over the last canape – but there are very few (I didn’t see any) formats of meetings designed to get people round a table talking – workshop style. Although these could have been happening but I just couldn’t find out about them.

I began to think that the solution to everything is here – we just need the right people to meet the right people. Of course, this is exactly what a COP is for, to get all the people with the power together with all the people with the solutions, but, to be honest, I am wondering whether there are ways of increasing the serendipity of meeting by the way the space is set up and run.

**COP Layout and Form is not conducive to what it sets out to do**

The whole setup of COP seems designed to retain people and ideas in silos of communication.

* ***Space layout***

Pavilions are laid out with most of the counties in one room and most of the other groups in another. Almost all of them have a meeting room with dais and seating in front. Some are more creatively constructed with open sides to invite you to come in, and seating at different levels and in different formats. France, German and the UN had particularly good pavilions.

The only pavilion I saw doing things really differently was the Pacific Blue Pavilion, where they had really taken the theme of this COP – Marine environment – and used it in their space, and had different meeting formats and two artists in residence.

The Layout of the space at COP itself contributes to the feeling of Silos and difference – with one hall for country pavilions (by and large) and one hall for other groups. And the space between pavilions feeling like gaps, rather than being used to link the various pavilions together.

* ***Event format***

The choice of events seems mind-blowing at first, with hundreds of parallel sessions, until you realise that every single event has the same format. Talks and speaker panel and then perhaps a few questions from the floor to the panel. The [Capacity Building Hub](https://unfccc.int/2nd-capacity-building-hub), established in COP24, is a space established to try and get more discussion going – but it seems also to have a panel format. The only event I passed that was different was a meeting of South Pacific indigenous youth who met sat in a circle within the Pacific Pavillion. There was also a tiny space (5x5m) which had been convened by an interfaith group, of Braham Kumaris (a new SCCS member) and the National Council of Churches of Australia, to invite people in for discussion and connection, and this was the first year they had tried it.

And, as mentioned before, the difficulty in finding out what is going on means that people go to events they hear about from people within their circles. The very fact of the sheer number of events on at the same time can lead to an event paralysis (well it did for me) where I didn’t know where it would be for me to be most effective and to learn the most, so I went nowhere.

* ***Divide and Dilute***

Groups giving the same message are divided into pavilions and events. Many groups with key communicators – eg voices from the frontline of climate change and IPCC scientists, are in so many events and are rushing around from place to place all the time. This is exacerbated by there being so many fewer voices in the COP from the front-line of climate change.

Interestingly IPCC scientists are rushing about, presenting at talks and events, doing press conferences and having meetings in much the same way that the civil society groups are. They are trying to get their voice heard too and are as frustrated as civil society that their interventions on urgency are being largely ignored by those in power. My analysis is that there is a lack of scientific understanding in their key audiences (on the various cycles of life – nutrient cycles, nitrogen cycles, and on physiological limits, and the potential for feedback – and this stuff is fixed by physical laws) to understand fully the truly catastrophic implications of what the scientists are saying. And that it would be much more effective to pair scientific knowledge alongside people’s experiences and on-the-ground knowledge of what is happening – ie from those on the front line of climate change.

* **Free Food and Drink is a massive draw but does it have the desired effect?**

The Black Fridays sales are nothing compared to the crush that develops when the first cork is popped on an evening reception after a talk. People gather near areas they know a reception is about to start, nonchalantly working on computers, strategically perched on nearby tables and bar stools, or discretely chatting in small groups with direct line of sight of staff laying out glasses and arranging trays of canapes. When the talk related to the reception ends and the people filter slowly out for their rewards, they find that the wine serving table is already swamped with jostling vultures.

There is a queue at every pavilion that serves coffee but people usually get their coffee and head off – it isn’t encouraging too much chat and meeting. It feels that this could be done better to encourage better interactions.

**Other practical stuff – but I think that this actually makes a difference**

* ***There are nowhere near enough places to sit.***

All over COP there are people gathered in small groups sitting on the ground or huddled, having meetings as there were not enough seats. In this COP there was plenty of space between pavilions and temporary rooms to set up sitting spaces but instead there was just acres of floorspace between walls. Creating good spaces for impromptu meetings and socialising would make all the difference.

* ***There isn’t any greenspace to refresh in***

This was at theme from so many people I spoke to – the lack of access to the natural world. The outdoor space had a few trees in pots and palms that are permanently there – so it wasn’t completely devoid of nature – and the house sparrows kept me company – but this was something many people remarked on as part of the challenge of COP – spending two weeks in a sterile building.

* ***There isn’t enough home-cooked good food.***

The food offerings inside the conference centre were the usual cafes and concessions and there were some additional food vans in the outside area. However there was only one place that you could get vegan food. This may be vital for vegans, but it also was unusual in being the only stall that had the type of nutriment not found in the ubiquitous cheese and chorizo sandwich: the greenery and vitamins you need when spending two weeks in an artificial space like COP. This van had giant queues but was a haven of good conversation, and the eternally cheerful helpers at the van gave a moment of joy in the day.

* ***There is only one way of doing things at COP***

There is nowhere to go to do different kinds of activities (other than talks and panel discussions and meetings etc etc) inside the COP venue. Nothing that would speak to other sides of people’s personalities – ie nowhere to rest and place to think (there is a prayer/chaplaincy space but it was apparently taken over with people sleeping, creativity, for exercise, etc etc. This seemed a real missing thing for those people shut up in the conference centre from two weeks.

**Some Final Observations**

When I came to COP25 I had no expectations that what we are doing in the civil society space in Glasgow, to create a welcome for people and provide venues for events, could have any impact on what goes on inside COP itself. Now I am of a completely different mind. I feel that if we are strategic and work closely with others who have influence on the inside, specifically using our newly built connections strategically, there is every chance that what we do, can have a real effect on COP26. Especially if we use our local knowledge and vision of what a Glasgow COP looks like and work with others that do have influence on the inside to create some key interventions that can start to break down the walls between Cop26 and the Civils society space outside Cop – and the rest of the world.

**Areas for Discussion at our whole Coalition meeting for COP26**

Here is a first stab at some areas for discussion and workshopping at our COP26 meeting where, I believe, we could both make the most difference to COP26 and build our own movement.

* **Using COP26 to maximise impact on Scottish Policy ahead of COP**

This is vital – targets are only numbers on a piece of paper without action, and the action needs to start immediately. What are SCCS priorities to get Scot Gov to agree on in Climate Change plan and other tings – North Sea Oil, road projects etc.

* **Telling the Scottish Civil Society Story**

How do we best use our story to help encourage ambition in the nations at COP26 – following such a flop and a race to the bottom at COP25

* **Front lining the Voices of those most affected by Climate Change**

This has been something we have been championing as SCCS all the way through COP25 and it got a lot of traction. With the Glasgow COP being the 5th COP in 6 to be in the Global North, this is something we need to take really seriously.

* **Welcome, hosting and caring for people**

It is obvious to me, now, that we could have a role to play for those inside COP26 who are tired and in need of refreshment. Both NGOs and perhaps even negotiators, as well as the role we can play hosting global civil society coming to Glasgow.

* **Breaking down the walls of COP – linking inside and out**

Key to success will be making the walls around the COP permeable for bringing civil society voice into COP – we can do this in various ways in working with many people including Glasgow City Council, but this could include: Giving the COP a sense of place, bringing our vision of a COP with a ‘Glasgow Spirit’ in with artists inside, live streaming of the civil society activities outside COP in, and voices that didn’t make it to Glasgow from global south nations, and even perhaps having a ‘people’s embassy’ in COP, where we can bring a new way of doing things into COP. Both Roseanna Cunningham and the leader of Glasgow City Council noted that they wished civil society to have a strong voice in the COP26. And also using our website for events outside COP we are creating to help people navigate COP events more easily (and therefore also get some interaction with what is going on outside COP)

* **Movement Building**

How do we make the most of the opportunities we have ahead to build the climate movement and create something that takes us forward in leaps and bounds after COP is over?

* **The Cities and non-state actors Agenda: How to make most the Glasgow City Council link**

It was clear that the Leader of Glasgow City Council intends to make the most of Glasgow as a location for COP by driving forward on the sub-state actors agenda – particularly the role of cities. This is an area that SCCS members may be interested in getting involved in, particularly as local authorities and cities are considered vital in actually delivering the targets that have been set at Scottish Government level.