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Paris Talks: Geography & Community

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Eyes on the Rise

Paris Talks: Geography & Community

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This special series of posts is produced by [Juliet Pinto](#) (Florida International University) and [Phaedra Pezzullo](#) (University of Colorado-Boulder)

In collaboration with [International Environmental Communication Association](#), FIU's [Sea Level Solutions Center](#), and [eyesontherise.org](#). Both Pinto and Pezzullo are attending [COP21](#) in Paris.

By Juliet Pinto, from Paris

Geography has a lot to do with how communities experience climate change and its impacts, and it has a lot to do with negotiating the terms of adapting to and mitigating them. I was reminded of that this morning when speaking with an attendee from the Democratic Republic of Congo. He asked about my work and what I've learned this week. When I mentioned my work on sea

level rise, it barely registered; he was much more interested in the panel I had attended on deforestation. Disappearing forests are much more of a problem in the DRC than sea level rise. Obviously, for my own experience in South Florida, the opposite is true.

Here at COP21, geographical distinctions are emphasized in every moment: what the Russians are saying, how the U.S. is arguing a point, what the agenda of the Saudis is, how the Chinese want something worded. All distinct experiences, all distinct agendas, multifaceted perspectives colliding in this event called the Conference of the Parties for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

At a panel today, “A Tale of Three Cities,” at the U.S. Center, the successes and challenges of three distinct geographies were discussed. Kotzebue, Alaska; Oakland, California; and Copenhagen, Denmark are (technically speaking) a village and two cities that could not be more different geographically and culturally, but all share a common thread. They have political leaders focused on making their spaces environmentally sustainable in the face of accelerating climate change.

In Kotzebue—which I mentioned in a previous post as an example of the impacts of climate change, such as coastal erosion, sea ice loss and food security issues—Councilwoman Maija Lukin was back to recount the ways the residents of the towns and villages came together as a group to adapt to their changing climate. Kotzebue, a town of 3,200 people that lies 60 miles north of the Arctic Circle and has an average winter temperature of negative 24 degrees Celsius, was a town facing extinction, as waves ate away at the land, the sea ice thinned as the temperature rose, and native species hunted for food disappeared with the changes. Seals, for example, a major source of iron, could no longer be hunted on the thin ice, and the local health center reported a sharp rise in dangerously high rates of anemia among the townsfolk.

In the absence of any outside assistance, the residents themselves met as tribes and community members and decided best practices for adaptation practices to allow them to continue living in Kotzebue, as well as maintaining their traditional cultural practices. For example, they employed community based management of the dwindling caribou populations, an important food source of protein for residents. So the townspeople, as a community, came together and decided that any family who needed a caribou would get one, and harvests would be managed and shared.

The main road along the beach was eroding away, not only putting in risk the homes and buildings of the town, but also affecting fish stocks by silting the nurseries. Lukin learned it would cost \$45 million to build a 4,500-foot road to shore up the coast. She said she was laughed at when she went to ask legislators for \$45 million for a road for 3,200 villagers in a remote part of Alaska (the high cost of building in the Arctic). Who could politically justify that expense for so few constituents?

So once again, the community came together: Lukin said she worked to get every stakeholder in Kotzebue, including tribal members, village businesses and regional organizations, and they focused on making the road the top priority for absolutely everyone. They went to Washington, DC, and used contacts there to argue for the road. They learned about how they could get funding from different pots of funding from federal and state sources, including for dust mitigation and road rehabilitation.

“We could not afford to wait for funding,” Lukin said. “We knew we had to act now, to work together, with the understanding we all serve the same people.” The road was completed in 2009, and President Obama visited Kotzebue this year, the first sitting U.S. president to travel past the Arctic Circle, to draw attention to the impacts of climate change.

In Oakland, Mayor Libby Schaaf, detailed how Oakland went from slightly sustainable to highly sustainable, with 68 percent lower carbon emissions

than the average U.S. city. Not only are they sustainable, but they've made a conscious effort to have these efforts help those in low-income neighborhoods first, as a means of boosting the entire city.

They installed clean energy rapid bus routes from lowest income neighborhoods to the downtown job area; they required all ships coming into the large Oakland port to plug into electrical outlets instead of idling their diesel engines, helping to reduce fumes at a nearby low income neighborhood that had been suffering from high asthma hospitalization rates; and they changed regulations so that people could grow their own fruits and vegetables and sell them, if they wished. And Schaaf noted that various of these initiatives paid for themselves, such as the cost savings from installing LED lights for all street and traffic lights.

Of course, Copenhagen is well known as a sustainable city. But what is surprising is that Mayor Jorgen Abilgaard noted the financing for their green initiatives—which are on track to make the city carbon neutral by 2020—is largely private money. “For every time we use \$1 in our city budget, we use \$100 of private investment,” Abilgaard said. “And of that, we use \$10 directly to invest in infrastructure.” He noted that partnerships with the private sector and universities was key to their success.

And so I wonder what Miami's journey will be, as we move toward the challenges of climate change impacts in the 21st century. Based on experiences from other geographies, one thing is sure: We must come together as a community and engage all stakeholders in meaningful dialogue and public-private partnerships that result in significant action, and this must happen soon.

