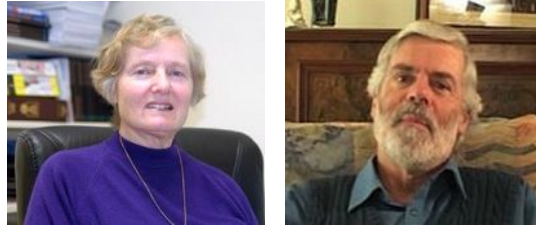


Converging on Copenhagen:
Franciscans act on climate change
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"Copenhagen needs to be the most ambitious international agreement ever negotiated. The alternative is mass starvation, mass migration, and mass sickness. If political leaders cannot assume responsibility for Copenhagen, they choose instead responsibility for failing humanity. In 2009, national leadership goes beyond the next elections, and far beyond national borders." (Kofi Annan, Global Humanitarian Forum, 2009)

For those who map global temperatures, the gathering in Copenhagen in December won't show a dramatic shift, at least not for some years. For those who map the heartbeat of humanity, Copenhagen will be a major moment. Will we, for the sake of our common future, abandon our self-interested bickering? Will we, collectively, listen to the earth?

The road to Copenhagen

It all began in Rio de Janeiro. The 1992 Rio Earth Summit, that is, organised as UNCED (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development). This conference raised enormous hopes world-wide, that the nations could act together to halt environmental vandalism. In fact, several vital initiatives and programmes began at Rio, but a lot of selfishness masquerading as 'national interest' blocked progress. The results of such selfishness have brought us to Copenhagen.

Following Rio, Franciscans International launched its Plant-a-Tree Project, as part of the world-wide awareness-raising and mobilization this Earth Summit stimulated. Literally millions of trees were planted by Franciscans in over fifty countries over the next five years. At a nursery school run by the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary in Pakistan, children between the ages of three and five planted five trees. The children's response was enthusiastic when their sister-teacher asked, "Have you thanked a green plant today?" Kids in Mexico named the trees they planted, adding greater interest in their well-being.

Other groups of Franciscans in Latin America began some of the first reforestation projects in their areas. In the USA, the Sisters of St. Francis of Clinton, Iowa instituted a Prairie Planting project on their 85 acres, one of the earliest efforts in the region to combat soil erosion, using only organic gardening methods.

Then the 1990s saw Franciscans International participating in UN conferences, as their threefold concern for poverty, world peace and the environment converged, again and again, to move hearts and minds, so that nations made better decisions - for us all.

Delegations of FI participated in the UN conferences through the 1990s on: Small Island Developing States, in Barbados (1994); the World Summit for Social Development, in Copenhagen (1995); the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), in Kyoto (1997); the International Conference on Financing for Development, in Monterrey (2002); annual meetings of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, held at UN headquarters in New York; and the UNFCCC meetings in Bali (2007), Poznan (2008) and, most recently, in Bonn, in June (2009).

A clear pattern was emerging in Franciscan circles. Every fresh disaster they encountered around the world threw three things into high relief: people suffered, the planet suffered, and some profited. Franciscans are going to Copenhagen with this vision - a focus on the most vulnerable, a focus on environmentally sustainable solutions, and a focus on the human rights that must be protected.

What happens at these conferences?

Franciscans International, and their many allies and partners, bring something to these conferences that most countries' delegates don't pack - a passion for the possibilities that Francis saw unleashed on the world. The Franciscan delegation is less burdened with the things that can tangle proceedings, such as protecting special privileges, defending inequalities, preserving appearances, covering incompetence and corruption. Through all the official meetings, the informative panels and roundtables, they hold their own vision of what could be happening - and they are quick to see signs of where it is emerging. So they gather each day to debrief, to share the highlights, to grieve the low-spots, and to celebrate the insights gained.

They also organise their own side-events (workshops) to throw light on the aspects that others may miss, or to let particular voices be heard (small island nations, indigenous nations, small farmers, women and children, poor and exploited peoples) that might get lost in the larger groupings. They co-sponsor these with other groups, because there is a special joy in finding similar passions for justice and peace in human hearts across the world.

In addition, the NGOs (Non-Government Organizations) present at the conferences hold their own formal briefings each day. The NGOs collaborate continuously and form, over time, a community whose members strengthen each other. Leadership in the community is fluid and dependent on whatever expertise the demands of the current UN agenda may require. FI delegates bring their skills of peace-building and their grasp of clear principles to these gatherings.

What has Franciscans International contributed on the way?

Franciscans International staff have often been singled out by the NGO community in New York to lead it or to provide a specialized skill. In 1995 at a preparatory meeting for the World Summit on Social Development, for instance, when the Delegation of Slovenia called for a global ethics, it was the Franciscans who responded and led the movement to found the first Values Caucus in UN history.

Then in 1996, the Conference of NGOs invited FI to chair the NGO Committee on Sustainable Development. At the seventeenth session of the Commission for Sustainable Development (UN, New York, May 2009), two FI delegates served as official note-takers at the Working Groups (where 192 nations tried to write a document on sustainability, together).

Another FI Delegate worked with the Fresh Water Caucus of NGOs to develop a paper on the many water issues that were under-represented in the Sustainability Commission's draft document. The Caucus circulated their paper to the official UN Country Delegations and spoke informally with these delegates "in the corridors" about water issues. The FI delegation was gratified to see a number of these issues incorporated in the final document of the Commission.

Converging on Copenhagen

Currently, FI is preparing a delegation to attend the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen, in December 2009. This could be a major turning point for the world - and human history. The Kyoto Protocols that regulate greenhouse gas emissions from different countries will be reviewed and recast, but in a context of increasing pressure, partly from serious rifts in world politics, and partly from the earth itself. In the words of the recent Global Humanitarian Forum (Geneva, 2009):

"Copenhagen will have to enact a full circle change in the direction of human activities in a space of less than ten years, and bring human society to less than 20 percent of current emissions in less than forty years. An extremely ambitious project given the entire planet is involved, including all of the major economies of the world ... it is clear that Copenhagen could well be the last chance for avoiding global catastrophe."

(Global Environmental Forum, 2009 *The Anatomy of a Silent Crisis*, p 77)

The major tasks of Copenhagen include decisions on the mitigation of what causes the climate change, adaptation to the inevitable rise in global temperature, transfer of technologies between nations to make this possible, and a fair sharing of the responsibility for funding these.

The issues surrounding "climate change" are vast but FI focuses on those of the most vulnerable: poor and exploited peoples, with special attention to women and girls; small island nations; and small farmers. Furthermore, FI supports negotiations that include the people most affected by climate change and that incorporate indigenous and low-tech solutions. FI also brings considerations of human rights, social justice and reconciliation to the

negotiating table, and a commitment to sustainable development, wherever human societies operate.

The "road to Copenhagen" is familiar to Franciscans International: it is symbolic of the arduous but hope-filled work we do. Because 35 million people are already displaced by climate change, and the stakes are high for the whole planet and all its people, FI travels to Copenhagen with the freight of human hearts, our griefs and our hopes. May we rise, beyond conflict, to re-affirm our common home, our common future, and our covenant with the earth. *f*

Editor's note:

C/SSF members will also be in Copenhagen as a chaplaincy group alongside the UN Conference on Climate Change. *f*