

The Conference of the Parties 24 climate negotiations in Katowice, Poland, are well underway. Major themes recur each year at these talks, such as equity among people and social justice.

One theme that has gained global traction is recognising the degraded environmental landscape that we are leaving to future generations.

Intergenerational justice

Many older people in developed countries are realising that the consequences of a high carbon lifestyle, that has been enjoyed throughout their lifetimes, now represent a threat to the viability of any kind of similar life for their descendants.

This realisation has spurred a wave of actions from divesting from fossil fuel related investments, to buying shares in the companies that pollute in order to have a say at shareholder meetings.

The ways and means of objecting to the destruction of the global commons is growing and with it the unity of purpose between people of all ages who want to turn the tide of human behaviour.

Young people at COP are seen but not heard

It is worth noting that the COP process is in its 24th year and though there is progress, it is slow. Many observers and commentators here agree that, overall, the adults in the room have failed to protect the health of the planet.

I have been attending the press conferences and events held by the UN's Youth Climate Delegates for the past few years and am very impressed with the level of organisation, the depth of knowledge, the clarity of message regarding what needs to happen, and the required determination to achieve a set of global goals.

YOUNGO host a series of side events that take place before and during the COP but are largely kept at arms length from the negotiations.

Unbalanced influence

I caught up with Saffran Mihnar, a Sri Lankan YOUNGO delegate whose role is to facilitate the communication team and policy operation on how young people see the negotiations at COP24.

When I asked Saffran about the limitations of the access given to youth delegates, he replied:

"The open doors are open and the closed doors are shut. It is at the discretion of the parties to decide whether observers should be allowed in or not. So far we have been allowed in [at COP24] but of course, we are also close to issues that parties do not want us to be involved with."

This means that the power brokers negotiating for safer global climate goals allow observers, which includes YOUNGO delegates, in when it suits them to listen, but if they consider the subject too delicate, they have the power of exclusion.

Despite this, the views of the fossil fuel industry are permitted into many of the talks and bring with them a very real influence, in terms of shaping what comes out. In this respect, it is not unfair to say that the wolves are allowed to guard the chickens.

Access should be broader

Frustrated by the lack of real power given to them, Saffran makes the following point:

“Everyone here is facing the climate change issue and government alone cannot achieve the Paris Agreement. [The parties] need to understand that 3rd Party involvement is really really essential, and the Paris Agreement cannot be achieved without young people.

Access [to the negotiations] should also be broader, so that young people can be involved with their respective delegations.”

When I asked Saffran if the youth delegates really have the capability and understanding to take part in these high-level talks, he doesn't hesitate to point out that YOUNGO delegates are trained to understand how the working groups operate and what is being discussed.

This point was reiterated to me at COP23 when I sat in on a press conference where nearly twenty young people delivered insightful reports on areas of the negotiations that met their expertise, ranging from impacts on food, water, sea-level rise, social justice, health, biodiversity and more.

They have the enthusiasm, but they need the power of the incumbents

With 24 years of climate negotiations behind us and the situation currently at a very critical stage, there is no conceivable downside to allowing expert young people into the party negotiations.

They represent the conscience of each nation and come with the moral license to kick much harder than those who are veterans in this struggle.

To achieve real impact, the status of youth observers needs to be upgraded to 'Negotiator' - we've wasted too much time and new energy is required to exponentiate the changes we need.

Source: theecologist