



The fierce urgency of now: integrating the youth voice at COP

Gillian Bowser^{1*}, Pamela H Templer², Susie S Ho³, Sarah A Green⁴, Sarah Hautzinger⁵, Isabelle Zhu-Maguire³, Alyssa Connaughton¹, Leah Dundon⁶, Diane Husic⁷, and Mark Urban⁸

¹Colorado State University (*gbowser@colostate.edu); ²Boston University; ³Monash University; ⁴Michigan Technological University; ⁵Colorado College; ⁶Vanderbilt University; ⁷Moravian University; ⁸University of Connecticut

Front Ecol Environ 2023; 21(4): 164–165, doi:10.1002/fee.2627

In 1963 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered one of his most enduring speeches. His words ring true nearly 60 years later. The “fierce urgency of now”, with “...no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism”, is more applicable than ever to a climate-change crisis emerging as humanity’s greatest challenge. The engagement of diverse voices is central to pushing governments toward ambitious commitments to reduce global warming. From the rise of youth activists like Greta Thunberg and the emergence of social justice movements like Black Lives Matter, today’s youth are insistently calling for social justice and climate solutions. Here, we as faculty and civil society observers of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP) reflect on the rapid changes in youth participation, and their struggle to find a voice within the chaos of a COP.

Why is there an urgent need to integrate the youth voice? Each year, the COP convenes 194 countries to review, negotiate, and conclude (if consensus is reached) climate negotiations. Given the role of the COP in moving the levers of international diplomacy and cooperation on climate change, it is crucial that youth, as custodians of the future, be heard. The climate crisis is not experienced equitably around the globe and youth voices consistently rate this as a top concern. Youth, First Nations peoples, people of color, persons with disability, women, and the LGBTIQ+ communities bear the brunt of extreme climate events, yet these same voices remain underrepresented among the COP’s scientists and decision makers. The COP is a unique pathway to develop future leaders in global governance, intercultural liaison, intergovernmental policy, and career-defining collaborations.

Yet, the COP is challenging to navigate for students and faculty alike. It is noisy and chaotic, with innumerable stakeholders in one place all at once. Being a delegate is akin to entering a crowded three-ring circus (Parson 2022) where each ring has a purpose and controls its own agenda; importantly, COP attendees may have access to only some rings, for only some of the

time. Each ring has multiple performers (envoys, civil society observers, or international corporations), with disparate interests (Figure 1). Access is limited from one ring to another through a complex ticketing system known as badges.

While the COP president (who hails each year from the hosting country) has striking similarities to a circus ringmaster, their power is limited to content within the *Negotiations ring*. Here, the president sets the agenda, assigns speakers, and controls or convenes communications and decisions. Other events within the Negotiations ring range from plenaries, informals, and even “informal informals”; doors may be closed to civil society observers and members of the media to enable private conversations among negotiators, or simply because of room capacity. In the surrounding zones, the Pavilion and Civil

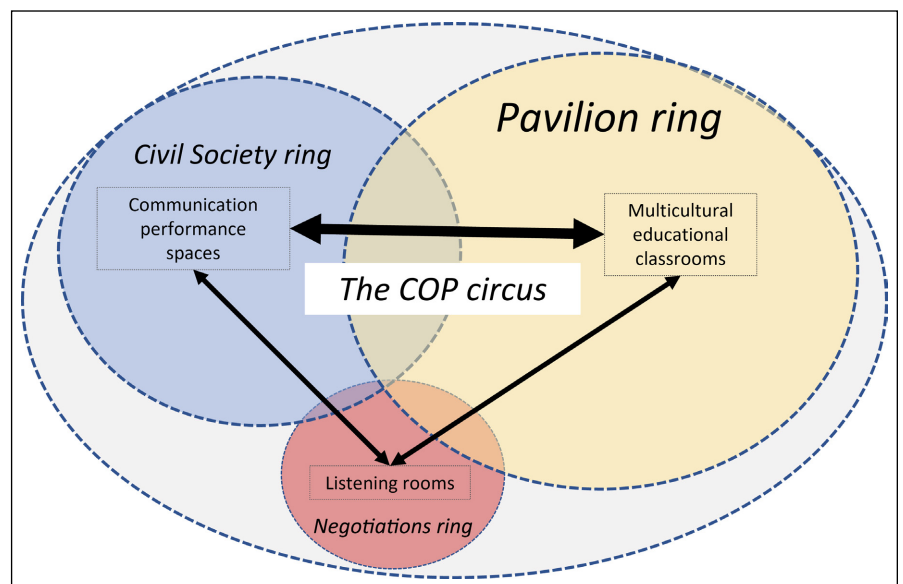


Figure 1. Within the annual COP meeting, the three rings (ovals) – *Civil Society*, *Pavilion*, and *Negotiations* – represent spaces for communication, multicultural learning, and listening. Civil society observers can primarily engage in two-way communication in the larger Civil Society and Pavilion rings, while typically participating only through listening in the Negotiations ring. The expectations of the COP are that discussions within each ring will inform the others and participants will listen to all messages equally. However, the intersections between the rings are often blurred and the information transfers among them can be imbalanced (indicated by arrow thickness), with greater information transfer typically occurring between the Civil Society and Pavilion rings, compared to each of these with the Negotiations ring.

Society rings are a free-flowing performance of many civil society observer acts and side shows. The *Pavilion ring* is physically the largest space, occupying most of the COP real estate. Countries, UN entities, and non-governmental organizations, often partnering with businesses, build pavilions where they control the narrative with the prime objective of telling their own stories. These spaces can operate as fascinating global, multicultural, interdisciplinary, and cross-sectorial classrooms. The *Civil Society ring* encompasses a multidimensional array of participants affiliated with one of over 3000 accredited observer organizations, ranging from green activists to fossil-fuel proponents to faith-based groups. Civil society observers typically focus on pressing for climate action through advocacy, including social media and engagement at home, while reporting on negotiations, sharing knowledge at informational sessions and exhibits, and taking actions such as protests.

Understanding the annual COP meeting structure is essential for knowing which “room” to get into and when speaking is effective (and allowed). Clear vision of how each ring operates, how badges are obtained, and the function of the COP itself provides a challenging navigational puzzle, which is difficult for first-time attendees. When we first explored the potential for expanding youth participation in the COP (Bowser *et al.* 2020), we highlighted the importance of youth delegates understanding the multicultural and intergovernmental policy context of the COP. We better understand now that to fully participate, students and early career scientists, especially those from more developed nations, need skillsets to participate in COP processes and have their voices heard.

We are often asked, “*So, did youth [as civil society observers] influence any actual negotiations at the COP?*” Negotiations are influenced through millions of tiny nudges applied before, during, and after each COP. So, while no specific instance can prove the impact of youth, their concerns are increasingly invoked in negotiation sessions. We can argue that every interaction between youth and party delegates enlightens both. One example is the Youth Environmental Alliance in Higher Education (YEAH), an international multi-institution student-centered research coordination network funded by the US National Science Foundation that facilitates student engagement at COPs (YEAH 2023). At COP27 we organized multiple events highlighting youth voices, including an art exhibit (Connaughton 2023) at the US Pavilion, press conferences, and a global exhibit hosting early career programs and presentations. Within the noisy Pavilion ring, those youth and early career voices *were* heard and this led to impromptu discussions between youth and US senators as well as key negotiators. At briefings to US Observers, youth met with John Kerry, the Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, to discuss the country’s role in loss and damage negotiations. Students also self-organized through YEAH, mobilizing early career scientists to create a global peer network to help navigate the COP circus and become more effective performers.

How do we help youth have a seat at the table? Higher education can play a role in training and capacity building for future leaders. As senior researchers, faculty, and experienced COP

participants, we need to equip students with understanding multicultural climate issues and diplomacy to effectively contribute to COPs (Whipple *et al.* 2021). To be “*in the room*” also means having effective science communication skills and promoting justice at home, which can be developed through a climate-change curriculum that trains, supports, and encourages diverse voices to take action on their own campuses (Caprini *et al.* 2020; Zhu-Maguire 2022). For example, the Climate Leaders Academy (hosted by Vanderbilt University in partnership with YEAH) is developing capacity for climate justice both within our borders and in the global community. The goals of YEAH align with those of the Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) plan (part of the 2015 Paris Agreement), which focuses on improving education and establishing dialogue with stakeholder groups (ACE 2023).

Higher education institutions can amplify student voices on the global stage through equipping emerging leaders with the tools necessary to perform in international policy spaces. The combined crises of climate change and inequity also demand that we diversify the ranks of incoming climate and environmental scientists, negotiators, and decision makers. Practically, we must develop students’ skills and understanding of climate science, social justice, and climate diplomacy. This requires broader access to educational tools and tailored curricula that build negotiation skills and networked opportunities at global fora. The call for “*Climate Justice Now!*” echoes Martin Luther King Jr.’s “*Fierce Urgency of Now*”. The multicultural and diverse voices of both civil rights and climate justice activists should “*Ring throughout the halls...*” at our institutions of higher education.

References

- ACE. 2023. Action for Climate Empowerment. New York, NY: United Nations. <https://bit.ly/3JHmYsR>. Viewed 17 Mar 2023.
- Bowser G, Green SA, Ho SS, and Templer PH. 2020. Educating students in solutions-oriented science. *Front Ecol Environ* 18: 171.
- Caprini A, Tariq A, Consalvo C, *et al.* 2020. Session 1E: Future Pathways for Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE). Global Conference of the Youth Environmental Alliance in Higher Education 22. <https://bit.ly/40hlyec>.
- Connaughton A. 2023. Voices and Visions: the art and science of climate action. <https://arcg.is/nnm8r>. Viewed 17 Mar 2023.
- Parson T. 2022. COPs as three-ring circus – Legal Planet. Berkeley, CA: UC Berkeley School of Law. <https://bit.ly/3YQ4pqI>. Viewed 17 Mar 2023.
- Whipple S, Tiwari S, Osborne TC, *et al.* 2021. Engaging Youth Environmental Alliance in Higher Education to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. *Scholarship Pract Undergrad Res* 5: 4–15.
- YEAH. 2023. Youth Environmental Alliance in Higher Education (YEAH). www.yeah-net.org. Viewed 17 Mar 2023.
- Zhu-Maguire I. 2022. COP27: More action needed to elevate voices at the forefront of climate change. <https://bit.ly/3JHNsKH>.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.