

Judith Kelley:

12 Duke students had an exciting opportunity. They attended the United Nations' Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, Scotland. The event is known as COP26.

TV News Reporter 1:

Welcome to the Bloomberg COP26 Climate Summit special, I'm Francine Lacqua here in Glasgow.

TV News Reporter 2:

It's day 6 of the UN Climate Summit in Glasgow, where world leaders have made major pledges to address climate change.

TV News Reporter 3:

President Biden is holding a news conference after attending COP26 global climate change summit in Glasgow, Scotland. Let's listen now to the President.

President Joe Biden:

At COP26, back in The Paris Agreement, raising domestic climate ambitions and demonstrating the commitment to support [fades down]

Judith Kelley:

Today, we'll take a look at that conference through the eyes of students, what stood out to them, what worried them, and what is giving them hope. Before heading to Scotland, my guests all took part in a practicum course to gain a better understanding of the issues at the heart of global climate change. And students then attended the COP26 as a class. Incredible.

Judith Kelley:

I'm Judith Kelley, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Emily Perry is a third year MBA and Master of Environmental Management candidate at the Nicholas School of the Environment and concentrating in Energy and Environment. Welcome, Emily.

Emily Perry:

Thank you so much, happy to be here.

Judith Kelley:

Sagar Shah is a senior at Duke majoring in Public Policy with a focus on Clean Energy Policy. Welcome, Sagar.

Sagar Shah:

Thank you, Dean Kelley.

Judith Kelley:

And the teaching assistant for the course, Gabriela Nagle Alverio, is also here. Gabriela is a dual student, JD and PhD in the University Program in Environmental Policy at Duke's Nicholas School of the Environment and the Sanford School of Public Policy. Welcome, Gabriela.

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

Thank you so much. It's great to be here.

Judith Kelley:

It's great to have all of you here. So first an easy question, you must all have been really excited to get the opportunity to attend this conference at such an important time in history. So let's start with you, Gabriela.

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

It is one of the best experiences I've had for a number of reasons. I would say the highlight though was just meeting so many people who all care about making progress on climate change, but who come at it from such different angles. And that's both the people at the COP and the students in the class.

Judith Kelley:

Sagar, how about you?

Sagar Shah:

Yeah, absolutely what Gabriela said. I think that when I talk to people back here at Duke who are asking how it was, it's really easy to be pessimistic about what the media coverage of world leaders is or what climate pledges are made, but the people there, around the world, I know now that in every community of this planet there are people who care immensely about climate change and they're going to keep fighting until there's no longer physically possible. And the best thing for me to do is to do the same thing here in my community. So that was my big takeaway and something that really impressed me from the conference.

Judith Kelley:

That's great. Emily, how does this rate for you?

Emily Perry:

Wow. I was in awe of the entire thing, especially the first few days. Just being among 20 to 30,000 other people that have similar goals and wishes for the planet that you all share was just breathtaking, honestly. And when I returned, I spoke to my friend [Zucarif 00:03:22], and we were joking that in an atmosphere like COP26, or any of the COPs, I'm sure, you wonder how not everyone on the planet is focusing on this issue all at the same time. And how does not everyone see this as the number one largest problem that our generation faces, and it just put a bit of a fire under us in a good way. So yeah, it was incredible, and definitely excited to continue this work.

Judith Kelley:

I'm glad you all got to experience this as part of your class. I can imagine it must have been wonderful, especially since you weren't standing outside with the protesters, you were actually inside the Blue Zone, which is where all the COP negotiations were taking place. And that's managed by the UN, not everybody gets to just walk in.

Judith Kelley:

Sagar, in the class blog you wrote, "The first two days of COP were confusing to say the least." What was the issue?

Sagar Shah:

Yeah, so what was unique about COP is that every day has a theme. So you're absolutely right, we were in the Blue Zone, and the Blue Zone is open to three primary groups. It's party delegates who are from country negotiating teams-

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sagar Shah:

... Media and press, and then observers, who are mostly non-governmental organizations of all different kinds. And so we were with observer status.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Sagar Shah:

And for those first two day, they were having what is called the World Leader Summit. And that's where you saw all the media coverage of the heads of state, like President Biden, Prime Minister Johnson, all making their pledges or speaking at the UN plenary.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sagar Shah:

And because of the high level of security needed for that type of event, observers weren't allowed to go near the negotiations or [crosstalk 00:05:02] near the meeting rooms at that time.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sagar Shah:

And so, an effect of that is that the section that we spent most of our time in, what's called the pavilions, [crosstalk 00:05:10] most of the pavilions just weren't hosting events, or they didn't have full events schedules those first two days, because they knew all the coverage was going to be on the world leader side.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Sagar Shah:

And so, the first two days was odd because the place that we had the most access to, wasn't really functioning at the level we were expecting.

Judith Kelley:

Yeah.

Sagar Shah:

So that's why I said once we got to Wednesday, then it started to kick into high gear for us.

Judith Kelley:

So once it finally got underway, what surprised you, Sagar?

Sagar Shah:

First of all, I was surprised by the vast array of angles people approach climate ads. So at Duke, most of my work has been on clean energy policy, however, in the United States, mostly. And so coming to this venue, I really was exposed to just how many different ways people tackle climate change, whether through it's a gender lens, through a migration lens, and the way all of these intersect, obviously.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sagar Shah:

So one of the cool things was that, as part of our course, all the students in the class come from a diverse array of backgrounds, so I was starting to get the hints that everyone takes this issue differently. And so to see it at COP and see everyone's pavilions have different events with these different types of lenses was really interesting.

Judith Kelley:

Gabriela, same question for you.

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

My answer would echo Sagar's, but I have another surprising moment too, which is a little bit more on the critical side, which is, we have the privilege of representing the research NGOs, the [crosstalk 00:06:37] RINGOs, in the negotiations.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

So most observers don't get the chance to, but you could go and have a seat at the table, and you have the same status as any of the parties. You have a mic, you have a name tag, and you can speak up and take part in the negotiations and make a point.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

And so sitting in those negotiations, it was actually so surprising to me how long and tedious they are. And outside of rooms, we're here talking about all the progress we're making and these big pledges and these big actions, and it feels really good. It feels exciting, and it feels like we're actually doing something. And I think the negotiations are incredibly important. To have every single state in the world sign onto something is a valuable thing, but [crosstalk 00:07:23] the process of it is so tedious.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

And sometimes you're sitting there just thinking, six people all just said the same thing, [crosstalk 00:07:32] and outside the world is burning.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

Can we move a little bit faster? So I did feel that, and that surprised me, to have that feeling.

Judith Kelley:

I can understand the tediousness of that, but of course it does make sense when you think about it too. It matters who says what, and just because somebody else said it, it still might matter to a party to make their point [crosstalk 00:07:54] clear as well.

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

Exactly.

Judith Kelley:

And I guess many other protestors outside also felt that this was, as Greta Thunberg said, "Blah, blah, blah," hinting at a lot of talk.

Greta Thunberg:

Build Back Better, blah, blah, blah. Green economy, blah, blah, blah. Net Zero by 2050, blah, blah, blah. Net Zero, blah, blah, blah. Climate neutral, blah, blah, blah. Our hopes and dreams drown in their empty words and promises.

Judith Kelley:

But did you feel like you also could see the progress that the negotiations, despite being tedious, were accomplishing anything? Or did you just feel like it was more of a blah, blah, blah show? Is Greta right?

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

I think there's truth to both sides. I think [crosstalk 00:08:36] there is a lot of blah, blah, blah, going on, and it's really important that activists push policy makers and keep that pressure on to move faster.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

At the same time, I also don't think that the COP does nothing. And I do think we accomplished some really important things. Many people have heard of The Paris Agreement. It was such a big inspiration, and it was the most ambitious climate change agreement that we've ever had. But one of the main things that came out of this COP, was actually figuring out the logistics on how we operationalized Paris.

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

So if we think Paris was so great, then it's also, COP26 was so great, because now we're actually going to take those things and figure out how to put them into practice. And I don't think that's the sexiest topic and it's not really covered by the media as much, but in our class, it's something that one of the issues that we were looking out for. And seeing that it played out in some of the ways that we were hoping for did give me hope, and I do think that there is validity in the process, and we still have to keep pushing for more progress.

Judith Kelley:

That makes sense. Speaking of the media, Emily, there was a reporter who asked you about your experience at the conference and you said something surprising, which was that you were inspired by the art, which was not probably what is on most people's minds when we think about climate change. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Emily Perry:

Yeah, it honestly wasn't necessarily on my mind as well when I had entered COP26, but the more you looked around, there was art everywhere. Some of it was in the pavilions, and it was really to showcase the culture of different local communities, indigenous peoples or countries. So everywhere you looked, there was something. There were moving exhibitions, there were paintings, there were pictures of both destruction and also hopeful futures at the same time. And so overall, it was surprising that day-to-day, how I felt emotionally, what I was processing, what was going on in the world on a larger scale, but also how important this moment at COP26 felt, it was strange.

Emily Perry:

So the very last day, I actually just happened to walk by the science pavilion, [crosstalk 00:10:51] and they were hosting an event called One Chance Left.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Emily Perry:

And I had recently seen flyers about it, and I thought it was very interesting that a poetry event was being held in the science pavilion. And so I was able to listen to extracts from poems created by scientists and health professionals. And so some of the poems were called Planting Ghosts, or How to Pierce a Heart, and they just had very inspirational names. And they were just short bits of what these real practitioners in the field felt about the Earth and nature and their place in it. And so, the goal of the event was really to support the science at the end of the day, [crosstalk 00:11:29] but also change the narrative.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Emily Perry:

And quote, this is what they said, "Cut through the doom and despair." And so, I was sitting there, and I was moved to tears, and I felt a little bit self-conscious about that, but then someone came up to close out the event and he had also teared up a bit. And so, it just was extremely beautiful to hear what the arts and what creativity could inspire in people, and I think that was the point of the event. And they created a book, they created a movie online, all of it's, really, mostly available for free.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Emily Perry:

And so, I came away from that inspired in a different way, separate from the law and the policy and the negotiations, and all of the action in the private sector as well. That was really important to me.

Judith Kelley:

It does sound beautiful, but also really important. I was born and grew up in Denmark, and Denmark has made considerable progress, though all countries, obviously, are still struggling to meet their goals. But I think Denmark has really been in the forefront in citizens choosing lifestyles that are as low carbon as possible, and in politicians coming together around policies, such as having entire islands be completely carbon neutral, and other things like that.

Judith Kelley:

And at the end of the day, the negotiations, the policies, they have to reach the hearts of people as well. People have to buy into being willing to support politicians who will support changes, but people also have to be willing to buy into changing how we live our lives. And so maybe art is an important way of speaking outside of the blah, blah, blah.

Emily Perry:

Yes, definitely. And I presented on this a little bit in my final presentation over the course, just because I found it so interesting. I had originally gone to COP26 to focus more and learn more about climate finance and access and deployment, but while I was at COP26, I learned that the UN announced that 2021 is actually the Year of the Creative Economy for Sustainable Development. And it's really to recognize the value of creativity as a powerful resource for sustainable development and climate action.

And so, people might wonder how could poetry and the arts be of any help during this global [crosstalk 00:14:04] crisis and climate breakdown?

Judith Kelley:

Yeah.

Emily Perry:

And I think it's a new way to confront the reality. It's a new way to process it, to speak about it, using your imagination and this sense of wonder about the Earth. And I had also studied environmental philosophy and wrote my thesis in undergrad on Thoreau, and found it very poetic and very inspiring, and it's one of the reasons that I'm doing what I do now. And so I just hope that it resonates with some. I know maybe not all, [crosstalk 00:14:35] but it definitely did with me.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Judith Kelley:

Yeah, speaking of thesis, Gabriela, you hope to focus your PhD research on climate-induced migration and conflict. Was that something that was spoken much about at all at COP26?

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

Yeah, it's so funny that you ask, because I went there and all our students have clients that they work with, and it gives them a structure of some of the things that they're going to do during the day.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

And as the TA, I obviously didn't have a client. And so I thought, how can I bring some structure to my day as well, in a way that connects to what I'm interested in? So I decided one of the things I want to do, with the hope of tracking more COPs in the future, is seeing how it is that discourse around climate migration changes over time at the COPs.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

And this year, in the very first week, which was the week that I was there, there wasn't too much conversation around migration. And the times that it came up, it was talked about as something that would happen if we didn't deal with climate change. Like migration as this thing to fear, pretty much. And in the second week, which I wasn't there for, but was able to hear some of the talks online and get some of the notes from the other students who had attended, they actually had a lot more sessions on migration. And some of this is due to the fact that the way that the COP is structured, is that each day has a different theme.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

And so on the theme where they were able to cover human wellbeing, they covered migration. And in this sense, I think that it was brought up by a lot of different actors, and especially people from developing countries and from those nations who are at threat of disappearing, really. That's who's driving the conversation right now.

Judith Kelley:

Was there anything, Gabriela, about the COP, or what was it, if something, that gave you hope?

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

I think what gave me hope aside from all of the people that I talked to, because I think that was number one, but we have touched on that.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

I think the other thing that gave me hope was the amount of activism that we saw. Think about any other UN convention or conference. How many people attend? How many people even hear about it? And COP26, everyone was talking about it. Everyone knows what it is. And part of that is because of all of the people who come who aren't in the Blue Zone, who come [crosstalk 00:17:10] there and protest on the streets, who skip school.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

All the schools in Glasgow closed for a day so that every single person could be on the streets marching for climate change. That is so inspiring to me and gives me hope that people really care, and that we are going to do something about this, and the pressure is not going to let up.

Judith Kelley:

That's [crosstalk 00:17:29]. Emily, was that you?

Emily Perry:

Yes, yes. I absolutely agree with Gabriela on this. The number of young people that I saw protesting, but also in COP26, was incredible. I saw a girl that couldn't have been older than 10 or 11 being interviewed, and I just know that she is already doing such incredible things in her life and must be an inspiration.

Emily Perry:

And on the youth day, in particular, it was also just incredible to see college students, and even younger, speaking on panels, speaking about the businesses they've created, the ventures, the things that they're also sick of hearing, the patterns that they're already picking up on. Like Greta saying, "Blah, blah, blah." It just can't be all talk, and calling for action, not just at COP26, but what comes after, because that's really the most important part here.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Emily Perry:

It was funny because sometimes the activists, they were on the other side of barricades, and it felt like us versus them sometimes. But a lot of times, I could have easily have been on that other side and agreed with so much of what they were saying, and just hope that that fighting doesn't stop.

Judith Kelley:

Sagar, you were asked to present about the COP26 experience that you had to the office in the US Department of Energy, where you worked last summer, and you said that you realized something important when you were preparing for that presentation. What did you realize?

Sagar Shah:

Yeah, so last summer I was working with the Weatherization and Intergovernmental Programs Office, which is a office that probably doesn't get a lot of coverage on the work that they do. But the big realization I had was, when we were at COP, we'd hear all these different world leaders, we'd hear ministers of the environment talking about their climate pledges and how their country's going to commit to doing something. And the thing I'd realized as I was presenting to this group, was that the program offices in each of these governments around the world, they're the ones who are on the ground administering a lot of the funding that ends up getting committed to climate.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sagar Shah:

And so, when we talk about climate action, there's tons of different ways people can take climate action. And that goes from local organizing right through, but ways businesses get involved in supplying clean energy solutions. But these program offices are an extremely important part of administering government funds invested in climate. And so, the Weatherization Program just got a massive increase in budget through the infrastructure bill, or Infrastructure Act that just passed [crosstalk 00:20:11] this past week.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Sagar Shah:

And so, they were really excited to be at the forefront of leading some of this climate action funding through this administration. And so, I was really inspired by the work that they were doing. And I also,

my message was a message of encouragement that this is what all these leaders are promising, exactly what you're doing here in this program office.

Judith Kelley:

Yeah. I guess this is the value of a class like this, and the opportunity to attend is that it gets to be a lot less abstract when you have a chance to really encounter all the moving pieces in this way. Gabriela and Emily, what is your thinking on climate change and where we're headed? Is there a takeaway from the conference that you would like to share?

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

One of the other issues that we were looking at in the class before we went was climate finance and how it was going to be administered, because developed countries had fallen short of the \$100 billion goal that they had set.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

And so, one of the other places where we need funding, and this is a takeaway I'm taking with as someone who wants to advocate for this and study this more, is in the space of loss and damage. We often talk about mitigation and adaptation, but loss and damage is a separate thing. It's what happens when there's irreparable damage or there's loss that can't be avoided. And so far to date, there has only been \$2 million committed to loss and damage, and we know that loss and damage isn't something that's going to happen in the future. It's already happening now.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

We are seeing communities who are losing their land. We're seeing people who are unable to return to their homes or entrapped in unsafe locations. And so, one of the analytical takeaways for me is really keeping an eye on what's going on with loss and damage and raising the voices of those who are fighting for it, because we know that developing countries came to the table with one of their goals being to have loss and damage funding committed to, and that didn't happen this year. And so, I don't want that to get lost in all the mess of what COP26 did.

Judith Kelley:

And it's especially important, right? Because loss and damage is so unevenly distributed, so inequally distributed, not just across countries, but also across populations within countries. And those who have enjoyed most of the spoils of the causes of climate change that we are seeing today are not the ones incurring the loss and damages proportionately.

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

Exactly. Yes, and we often see a divide between developed and developing countries, and yet even in the country that we're in today, there is a lot of loss and damage happening to communities who have been historically marginalized and oppressed, and that's something that we should be talking about too.

Judith Kelley:

Excellent. I don't actually know whether I was speaking with Emily or Gabriela, because I can't see you and I haven't got your [crosstalk 00:23:28] voice-

Gabriela Nagle Alverio:

That was Gabriela.

Judith Kelley:

That was Gabriela. Emily, what's your major takeaway?

Emily Perry:

Yes. Now, it's Emily, but I'll say that Gabriela and I are, I feel, on the exact same wavelength right now, so I'll actually build upon what she said. I, at COP26, was primarily working with the Rocky Mountain Institute CFAN, which is the Climate Finance Access Network. Their focus, and they're pretty new, is really about supporting developing countries and securing and structuring finance for climate investments. And so, I was attending different events in the AOSIS pavilion, which is the Alliance of Small Island States, and was able to hear from representatives about, literally, the real time loss and damage, and the sinking of their islands, and the loss of economic opportunity, and the need for reparations through some sort of loss and damage funding. And I think that the CFAN network is really quite interesting because they developed a network of embedded climate finance advisors to help build the capacity of [crosstalk 00:24:41] developing countries to more quickly access climate finance, and also achieve their climate objectives.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Emily Perry:

Because as you said, we know that there isn't a fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, and there's also a lack of meaningful involvement for all people when we talk about climate change and its impacts. And so, environmental justice is also at the core of this. And so often, there are consultants go into these countries and "fix the problem", gain all the knowledge of the system, and then leave with it. And so there's no legacy of knowledge there gained, and so really being able to build up, again, the capacity of the people in these countries, and sustaining, and really encouraging the next wave, the workforce, I think is key to this.

Emily Perry:

And even more, people come away, I think, from the COPs with very different feelings about if it was successful, if it was a failure. And some were saying, oh, this is the first time COP has ever done this or said this, or for example, called out fossil fuels, really, as the problem at the end of the day. I thought that was interesting, that over the 30-some odd years, fossil fuels really haven't been bolded underlined as the main issue at hand.

Emily Perry:

But time and time again, while that's new, what isn't new is the fact that we talk about the importance of climate finance, and access, and deployment, and making sure that we're working with those that are facing the most harm.

Judith Kelley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Emily Perry:

So I think building off of, again, what Gabriela said, climate finance is so important, and making sure that those that need it can actually access it and use it for their own goals is key.

Judith Kelley:

Well, we're very lucky that we have three young people like yourselves who care about an issue like climate change. And clearly, you've taken a lot away from your experience. So I want to thank you all for joining me. Sagar Shah is an undergraduate Public Policy major. Emily Perry is an MBA and MEM candidate at the Nicholas School of the Environment. Gabriela Nagle Alverio is a JD and PhD student in the University Program in Environmental Policy.

Judith Kelley:

We'll have a link to the class we've been talking about, Public Policy 592, the UN Climate Change Negotiations Practicum at our website [Policy360.org](http://Policy360.org). The class is taught by Professors Jonathan Wiener and Billy Pizer, and now thanks to them as well.

Judith Kelley:

And if you are interested in the episode that we've discussed today, you may want to check out our website [Policy360.org](http://Policy360.org). There are a number of episodes you might find interesting. Episode 96 is a Q&A on climate change policy law and legislation, and that's actually with Professor Billy Pizer, who is the professor of this class. Episode 95 is about the unseen health effects of forest fires, and episode 92 was about the fact that we shouldn't just be documenting declines in nature, but that there are ways that we can be reversing them. So you will find these episodes and many others on climate and other important policy issues at [Policy360.org](http://Policy360.org). We'll be back with another conversation soon, I'm Judith Kelley.