

What's Your Issue?

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In February of 2011, I took the first step of a journey that would change my perspective on life of what I knew to be true. I filled out the application to be part of the Dickinson College Global Climate Change Africa Mosaic (“the Mosaic”). The Mosaic was a unique semester in which a group of 11 students took four classes in the fall of 2011 to prepare for a trip to the 17th Conference of the Parties (COP 17) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Durban, South Africa. We spent the first two weeks of our three-week trip at the conference doing research on climate change negotiations, and the final week outside of Durban in the Valley of 1,000 Hills doing a service learning project. When I started, I was an environmental science major who was sure that climate change was a serious issue. I figured that the reason political progress was slow in this area was because political leaders did not understand the gravity of the situation, for surely if they did, they would do something to remedy it. The truth is, I did not understand the gravity of the situation myself, and world leaders may not be experts in the field, but they have a better grasp of the situation than I originally gave them credit for.

These classes have given me a new perspective on environmental issues. Before this experience, I used the terms “climate change” and “global warming” interchangeably, but in actuality global warming is an outdated term that refers to the overall warming of the planet that is occurring, but it does not address the full spectrum of the problem. I also came to redefine the term “sustainability.” I have always thought of sustainability as synonymous with “eco-friendly” and “alternative energy,” but it is not. It is so much more than my vision of infinite sources of energy which emit less pollution, such as wind and solar. Sustainability is an energy system based in renewable resources, but sustainability is also relevant to food production systems that need to provide food for the seven billion people on this planet without depleting the resources for future generations. Sustainability can also refer to an economic system that still flourishes with the finite resources available on earth. First of all, there is scientific consensus that climate change is happening. Opinions do differ on how quickly it is happening, how quickly we need to take action, and how severe the consequences will be if we do not, but every day there is more and more certainty that action needs to be taken sooner rather than later. Prior to this semester even I, the environmental science student, believed that there was some confusion among the scientific community about climate change, even if I personally believed it to be happening.

This past semester’s experiences reaffirmed that life is not fair. The countries that have contributed most to the problem are not the ones that will suffer the most from its consequences. Rather, the countries least equipped to handle the situation are the ones most likely to suffer severely, such as some areas in Africa and South Asia that are already feeling the effects of climate change. Both geographical location and a country’s capacity to handle the effects that it will experience determine how vulnerable that country is to the effects of climate change. For example, Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world and has a high poverty rate, which exacerbates the effects of even minor changes in climate.

Finally, I learned that the political leaders of the world do know about climate change, and they understand the effects that it could have on the whole world in the future and on the vulnerable populations in the very near future. Prior to this experience, I had believed that

political leaders in the US would feel obligated to do something if they understood the gravity of the situation. After all, we expect that they are voted into office to protect the rights of the people. Political leaders in the US and other countries know, yet due to their political agendas, they continue to enact minimally ambitious legislation that will not reduce emissions quickly enough.

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The first two weeks of the adventure were incredible. We met many influential climate officials, such as one of the leading negotiators for the US and the Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the international body that informs the UNFCCC on the science of climate change, including its effects and risks. We also met conference delegates from all over the world, including the Maldives, Kenya, Nigeria, and Bangladesh. We discussed climate change with the very people who study it and have the power to enact positive change. I learned about adaptation and mitigation efforts throughout the world, and I saw small developing countries take a strong stance on climate change. While the conference experience and the research I was doing on international negotiations were extremely important for my education, the last week of the trip was the one that truly changed my life.

We spent the last week in South Africa in the Valley of 1,000 Hills. The first few days were spent working at a children's village called Makaphutu, an orphanage for children who have lost one or both parents to HIV/AIDS. In developing countries, approximately two percent of children become orphaned by HIV/AIDS. In South Africa, this number is closer to seventeen percent, so places like Makaphutu are vital (Lovingly Accurate Ministries 2012).

We performed small tasks like sorting through donations and larger projects like cleaning and painting new rooms for children, but the most emotional part for me was helping with the distribution of food and clothes to the women of the community. Makaphutu distributes its extra food and clothing donations to the surrounding community. Interacting with the members of the community during the distribution was an emotional experience that no words can completely describe. The first place we stopped was an orphanage that did not have even close to the meager means that Makaphutu did. Makaphutu has multiple buildings to house all the children, but this orphanage is a small one-room building that served as a schoolroom, daycare, and bedroom. When we arrived to drop off the food we were greeted by warm hugs from the women, and then the children sang South Africa's national anthem for us. While most of the kids were passionately singing the national anthem, one little girl, no more than two years old, was dancing by herself in front of the group to her own song. It was a breath-taking experience. I knew in that moment I wanted to do everything I could to help.

We were greeted at our next stop by ululation, celebratory calls similar to yelling "thank you" or "Hallelujah!" when something you have been praying for arrives. Before we got out of the car we could hear the women from down the road. They were so grateful for the food that we were bringing because without it they and the children would not be able to survive, and they wanted to share a piece of themselves with us in return. They wanted us to know who they were and to bring their stories back home with us. One of the women brought us into her house and gave us a tour. It was a small blue house with a makeshift stove and couch. She had made most of her tools and furniture from materials she could find, such as old tires and wood pieces. She was so proud of her ability to make something from nothing, and she wanted us to see what she had managed achieved with so little. It was not a typical type of beauty that we imagine here in America. Nothing was new, everything was faded or torn, but she had made it home by painting

a mural on the wall to cover a watermark and stitching a fun patch over a rip, and it had become beautiful in its own way.

Finally, we went to a central spot in town where women had been lined up for hours waiting for us to come so they might get a bottle of cooking oil, a bag of flour, or some shoes for their child. So many of the women came up to me, hugged me, kissed me, and thanked me wholeheartedly for what I was doing. It was just one bag of flour. I was just helping to pass it out so that everyone got something, and yet these women thanked me for dedicating my time.

Spending the last week in the Valley of 1,000 Hills was the most appropriate way to end our trip. It was a week for the group to reflect, both individually and communally. We reflected on many aspects of the experiences, but the link between the climate change we discussed at the COP and the poverty we witnessed firsthand stuck with me the most.

How is it fair that we were born into the comfortable lifestyles in which we live? While many of my peers and I are obsessed with purchasing fancy iPhones and Macbooks, these people cannot put food on the table for dinner. The percentage of the South African population living below the poverty line is 23 percent, which is down from 38 percent in 2000 (The World Bank 2012). In a world where people have so much, this is unacceptable. One in every four South Africans lives below the estimated minimum level of income needed to secure necessities of life. South Africa is considered one of the “better off” African countries, meaning the even less developed countries in all parts of the world are struggling far more.

The images in our minds of the distribution lines, the grateful people, and the pride in what they did have will stay with me. We all wanted to change their situations for the better, but we did not know how. That is when one of my professors asked us this question: “Considering all that we have learned this past semester and saw from the children of Makaphutu to the women of the distribution line, is climate change the most important issue to each of us?”

I have thought about this question almost every day since I arrived home, and I am still grappling with how I prioritize the issues that are most important to me. I can say that all I have learned this semester has taught me that climate change is bigger than an environmental issue. Although I think that saving the environment is a valid and important thing to do, climate change is also a human rights issue. As the climate changes, life will only get harder for the people barely scraping by in this world. Life will become more complicated for people living off of the land, such as farmers and herders, because their lives are so dependent on consistent climate patterns. In some areas, water will become scarcer, while other regions will suffer from flooding. As the climate changes, the people in need will need even more help. How can we provide them with this additional help when we do not currently provide them with enough aid, and we ourselves do nothing to address the root of the issue? Bringing them cans of food and boxes of clothes and shoes does not help them fix the problem; it puts a Band-Aid on it. It is said, “Give a man a fish and feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” Climate change will make this problem even harder to fix. How do we teach these people to “fish” when the world around them is changing so quickly that “fishing” may not be possible in five to ten years.

I have come to the conclusion that one of the ways that we can help the people who are suffering is by tackling climate change. Donations to organizations like Makaphutu are important, and going there in person is even better. We also need legislation that will protect them and their families in the future. Governments like that of the United States must enact mitigation legislation to reduce our impacts, and adaptation measures should be taken where they are needed. The COP is trying to do this, but it is not working fast enough. All those informed

about climate change, including my Mosaic peers and me, have an obligation to share what we know about climate change, about the people, about the link between climate change and poverty and take up their cause. Human rights and climate change are linked, and we can take up two huge issues at once. It will not be easy, but I'm certainly going to give it my best.

In reflecting upon my experience as a part of the Mosaic, I have made many important connections. Prior to this trip, I believed that climate change and poverty were important, but I did not understand the relationship between the two. I believed that hydraulic fracturing, a form of natural gas drilling on land, was the most important issue to me, and sustainability was just a word. Now, I see that even hydro-fracking and climate change are related because our dependency on fossil fuels has gotten us into this climate change predicament, and the actions of a few countries will have and are already having effects on other countries all over the world. Through the Mosaic, I have learned to connect climate change to many of the issues that I care about and see how interconnected many of the world's biggest issues are.

In fact, if I have learned anything this semester, it is that I have only just breached the surface of understanding climate change, and I could study it for the rest of my life and still not know everything. I have learned that there is no way we will solve climate change tomorrow, but if we do not start working, then there is no way we can sustain life on this planet as we have come to know it. This semester has made me realize that I want to dedicate the rest of my life to further study of climate change. Specifically, I hope to do research on water scarcity in developing countries induced by climate change as this is and will continue to be a significant environmental problem. I take up the call to arms against climate change because I need a solution to climate change, the vulnerable people of the world need a solution to climate change, and future generations need a solution to climate change. This will require tough decisions and sacrifices on many people's parts, but these actions are required to sustain the cultures, livelihoods, and environmental processes of the planet and those who inhabit it.

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### References

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