

# A History of the Climate Negotiations in Six Videos

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A few days ago, the topic for my undergraduate class, Earth in Crisis, taught to 150 students, half in Sociology and half in Environmental Studies at UC Santa Barbara, was “What a COP is *Really* Like, and What the Treaty Looks Like.”

We never got to looking the [current treaty text](#) in our seventy-five minute session, but there’s no shame in that, as neither did the 190-plus negotiators during last week’s Bonn intersessional, and they had five full days.

I was going to start with Copenhagen, which I attended for five days in the outside, leaning about climate justice for the first time in the KlimaForum at the knees of [Naomi Klein](#), [Bill McKibben](#), and [Mohamed Nasheed](#). I also witnessed the “Battle of Copenhagen” unfold in the snow outside the Bella Center where a march of 4,000 activists tried to meet up with delegated members of civil society and the handful of progressive negotiators like Pablo Solon of Bolivia and Mohamed Aslam of the Philippines, only to be met with police batons and kept apart [a shocking video of part of this action can be seen [here](#)].

## Severn Suzuki at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio

Instead, perhaps because I had shown it two days prior to that at a [forum](#) that members of UCSB’s [Climate Justice Project](#) had put on called “The Paris COP 21 Climate Summit: Why We Are Going and What We Hope to Do There for Climate Justice,” I thought I would set the scene with the famous, heart-rending and poignant oration delivered by twelve-year old Severn Suzuki at the Earth Summit in Rio in July 1992, which I urge you to view [here](#):



Here is how she ended her speech:

Two days ago here in Brazil, we were shocked when we spent some time with some children living on the streets. And this is what one child told us: “I wish I was rich and if I were, I would give all the street children food, clothes, medicine, shelter and love and affection.”

If a child on the street who has nothing, is willing to share, why are we who have everything still so greedy?

I can't stop thinking that these children are my age, that it makes a tremendous difference where you are born, that I could be one of those children living in the favelas of Rio, I could be a child starving in Somalia, a victim of war in the Middle East or a beggar in India.

I'm only a child yet I know if all the money spent on war was spent on ending poverty and finding environmental answers, what a wonderful place this earth would be!

At school, even in kindergarten, you teach us how to behave in the world. You teach us:

- not to fight with others,
- to work things out,
- to respect others,
- to clean up our mess,
- not to hurt other creatures
- to share, not be greedy.

Then why do you go out and do the things you tell us not to do?

Do not forget why you're attending these conferences, who you're doing this for – we are your own children. You are deciding what kind of world we will grow up in. Parents should be able to comfort their children by saying “everything's going to be alright,” “we're doing the best we can,” and “it's not the end of the world.

But I don't think you can say that to us anymore. Are we even on your list of priorities? My father always says “You are what you do, not what you say.

Well, what you do makes me cry at night. You grownups say you love us. I challenge you, please make your actions reflect your words. Thank you for listening.

It's pretty hard to say it any better than a twelve year-old did in Rio twenty-three years ago. Appealing to the humanity of the delegates, asking them to follow their own moral precepts, to be generous, to think of the future, to respect Mother Earth, she electrified the hall.

And, to their credit, out of Rio came the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (the [IPCC](#), which now gives us the state of the art of climate science), and the United Nations Framework Conventional on Climate Change (the [UNFCCC](#), which oversees the COP process). And five years later, at COP 3 in Kyoto, the world delivered its first climate treaty, the [Kyoto Protocol](#), which if it had been adhered to, would have certainly put us in a far better position than we are in today, headed for 3.6 degrees Celsius by 2100 with global “business-as-usual,” or should we say “capitalism as usual”?

Instead, the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases at the time (and still the all-time record holder), the United States, never ratified the treaty, along with Australia; Japan and Canada later dropped out; and by 2009, we were promised a new and better treaty would be signed at COP 15 in Copenhagen.

### **Tom Smith Nails the Outcome at Copenhagen's COP 15 in December 2009**

I've already talked about Copenhagen, above. What started as Copenhagen ended as Copenhagen. Tom Smith, a young British climate activist in the fledgling [UKYCC](#) (the U.K. Youth Climate Coalition), explains what was at stake for him and many other climate campaigners in this remarkable [video interview](#), "We're Not Done Yet."

Among other things, he says:

They haven't committed to emission targets; they want to limit temperature increase to two degrees, which basically means that's a number of countries that are going to go underwater. They also haven't given sufficient adaptation funds for developing nations. It might as well have not have happened and we have well been in the same situation that we were two weeks ago.



Even though this was the biggest climate summit that's ever happened, it hasn't moved anything; it proves the UN isn't working at the moment. This process has been going on for eighteen years. Some of the delegations here are that old and this has been going on the whole of their lifetime and it still hasn't worked.

I met a girl called Alysia from the Maldives about a week ago; she'd given an interview to the press, like just begging people to look after her and to look after her people and saying how terrified she was that by the time she was forty or fifty, she's going to be an environmental refugee. She wasn't going to have a home. She didn't even make it to the end of the press interview because she was so emotional. It's really, really painful to see these kinds of emotions in real life; to see these people just begging the world to listen to them and for them to be swept aside like nothing and for nothing to come out of Copenhagen, it's fucking painful.

He goes on to say:

All the actions we have done may not have literally changed what's happened on the inside but when we're walking along with 100,000 people from all different walks of life, children, families, businessmen, it just showed there is a momentum. The passion that's, that has been showing in the last few weeks has been so amazing. The whole of the team, the whole of the international youth, the whole of the movement is hopeful and it's exciting. It's been one of the more important things that's been going on. Much more important than what's been

going on inside the conference center is to see the movement growing, and to see the passion growing, is to see the possibilities growing, there has been so many moments that just remind exactly why I'm here.

Getting to know international youth has been one of the greatest things; we've sponsored quite a few Kenyans to come over so, we've spent a lot of time getting to know them when they get here.

Two groups from the other side of the world, sitting in a tiny restaurant, chatting about our languages and our cultures; we played snowball fights with them, we played football. It just makes the whole UN process at the moment seem ridiculous. It's like every country is fighting for itself, thinking about "what can I get out of this?" All of the youth are going to be affected, from all over around the world.

To form those kinds of bonds with those people is so incredible because when you're older, you're all going to work together and maybe there won't be this divide that there is at the moment. But the reason I got, the reason I got involved in the whole this thing is it's not about negativity. It's about making sure that the good stuff that we have is protected....

Copenhagen was never going to be the end; we need more of the population of the world to come aboard. We need to show the world leaders that we know enough and we care enough. We're going to keep going; if we have to change the way the UN system works, we'll do it...

I'm twenty years old. I'm a random guy from a little village just near Cambridge. I'm not a genius. I'm not a scientist. I'm not a politician. But I'm here and I am having an influence and I am influencing people and influencing the process because I'm here and if the whole of the world did that, whatever they could, whatever time they had, it would completely change the world

You're not just on your own in this but you've got everyone around you lighting torches, not going to give up fighting

And we're not done yet.

Though the movement is said to have gone into a two-year depression after vesting its hopes in Copenhagen, it's not quite true, is it? In April of 2010, it reassembled in Cochabamba, Bolivia, and drafted one of the most radical documents of climate justice we have, "The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth," which [affirms](#) that "The Inherent Rights of Mother Earth" include, among many other things:

- *the right to life and to exist;*
- *the right to be respected;*

- *the right to regenerate its bio-capacity and to continue its vital cycles and processes free from human disruptions;*
- *the right to maintain its identity and integrity as a distinct, self-regulating and interrelated being;*
- *the right to water as a source of life;*
- *the right to clean air;*
- *the right to integral health;*
- *the right to be free from contamination, pollution and toxic or radioactive waste;*
- *the right to not have its genetic structure modified or disrupted in a manner that threatens its integrity or vital and healthy functioning;*
- *the right to full and prompt restoration the violation of the rights recognized in this Declaration caused by human activities*

### **Anjali Appadurai Demands “Get it done!” on behalf of Global Civil Society at the \End of COP 11 in Durban in 2011**



And by COP 17 in Durban, South Africa, the movement was back inside the COP, and this time, it was being energized by young people’s rising voices. Civil society (that means all of *us*) gets to observe some of the negotiations at a COP, and to make “interventions” (arguments and demands) at certain key moments of each COP, such as the Opening Plenary on day one and the Final Plenary on the last day. As long as time remains after all the country delegations

who want to speak have had their say, that is. In Durban, on the last day,

Anjali Appadurai, a student at the College of the Atlantic in Maine, USA, went to the podium and addressed the assembled countries and representatives of the world and planet who could squeeze into the room in a passionate and blistering call on the delegates to heed the voices of the world’s youth, and to act responsibly. The [speech](#) is titled, accurately, “Get It Done!”

I speak for more than half the world’s population. We are the silent majority. You’ve given us a seat in this hall, but our interests are not on the table. What does it take to get a stake in this game? Lobbyists? Corporate influence? Money? You’ve been negotiating all my life. In that time, you’ve failed to meet pledges, you’ve missed targets, and you’ve broken promises. But you’ve heard this all before.

We’re in Africa, home to communities on the front line of climate change. The world’s poorest countries need funding for adaptation *now*.... But as 2012 dawns, the Green Climate Fund is empty.

The International Energy Agency tells us we have five years until the window to avoid irreversible climate change closes. The science tells us that we have five years maximum. You're saying, "Give us ten."

The most stark betrayal of your generation's responsibility to ours is that you call this "*ambition*." Where is the courage in these rooms? Now is not the time for incremental action. In the long run, these will be seen as the defining moments of an era in which narrow self-interest prevailed over science, reason and common compassion.

There *is* real ambition in this room, but it's been dismissed as radical, deemed not politically possible. Stand with Africa. Long-term thinking is not radical. What's radical is to completely alter the planet's climate, to betray the future of my generation, and to condemn millions to death by climate change. What's radical is to write off the fact that change is within our reach. 2011 was the year in which the silent majority found their voice, the year when the bottom shook the top. 2011 was the year when the radical became reality.

Common, but differentiated, and historical responsibility are not up for debate. Respect the foundational principles of this convention. Respect the integral values of humanity. Respect the future of your descendants. Mandela said, "It always seems impossible, until it's done." So, distinguished delegates and governments around the world, governments of the developed world, deep cuts now. Get it *done*.

With these words she brought down the house and compelled the session chair to confess: "On a purely personal note, I wonder why we let not speak half of the world's population first in this conference, but only last."

### **Yeb Saño Makes the World Cry and Fasts for Loss and Damage in Warsaw at COP 19 in 2013**

Fast forward two years, and almost nothing has been accomplished since Durban ended with a promise of crafting a new global climate treaty by 2015. COP 19 opened on a gloomy day in Warsaw, Poland, against the backdrop of a massively destructive cyclone named Haiyan/Yolanda striking the Philippines – the second year in a row when by some cruel irony such an unnatural disaster had occurred.



*Yeb Saño. Photo by Ben Liddie*

When the chief delegate from the Philippines, Naderev “Yeb” Saño, took his turn at the podium, the crowd was expectant, but no one was prepared for the electricity of what followed, providing the first sign that the world might not stand idly by while the COP took only baby steps in the negotiations. Saño addressed the assembled nations with these words. Here is the [video](#) (read the full text of his seventeen-minute speech [here](#)).

To anyone who continues to deny the reality that is climate change, I dare you to get off your ivory tower and away from the comfort of your armchair. I dare you to go to the islands of the Pacific, the islands of the Caribbean and the islands of the Indian Ocean and see the impacts of rising sea levels, to the mountainous regions of the Himalayas and the Andes to see communities confronting glacial floods, to the Arctic where communities grapple with the fast dwindling polar ice caps, to the large deltas of the Mekong, the Ganges, the Amazon, and the Nile where lives and livelihoods are drowned, to the hills of Central America that confront similar monstrous hurricanes, to the vast savannas of Africa where climate change has likewise become a matter of life and death as food and water become scarce. Not to forget the massive hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico and the eastern seaboard of North America. And if that is not enough, you may want to pay a visit to the Philippines right now....

What my country is going through as a result of this extreme climate event is madness. The climate crisis is *madness*....

It is the nineteenth COP, but we might as well stop counting, because my country refuses to accept that a COP30 or a COP40 will be needed to solve climate change. And because it seems that despite the significant gains we have had since the UNFCCC was born, twenty years hence we continue to fail in fulfilling the ultimate objective of the Convention. Now, we find ourselves in a situation where we have to ask ourselves – can we ever attain the objective set out in Article 2 – which is to prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system? By failing to meet the objectives of the Convention, we may have ratified the doom of vulnerable countries.



We find ourselves at a critical juncture and the situation is such that even the most ambitious emissions reductions by developed countries, who should have been taking the lead in combating climate change in the past two decades, will not be enough to avert the crisis. It is now too late, too late to talk about the world being able to rely on Annex I countries to solve the climate crisis. We have entered a new era that demands global solidarity in order to fight climate change and ensure that pursuit of sustainable human development remains at the fore of the global community's efforts. This is why means of implementation for developing countries is ever more crucial....

We cannot sit and stay helpless staring at this international climate stalemate. It is now time to take action. We need an *emergency climate pathway*....

This process under the UNFCCC has been called many names. It has been called a farce. It has been called an annual carbon-intensive gathering of useless frequent flyers. It has been called many names. But it has also been called the Project to save the Planet. It has been called "saving tomorrow today." We can fix this. We can stop this madness. Right now. Right here, in the middle of this football field.

I call on you to lead us. And let Poland be forever known as the place we truly cared to stop this madness. Can humanity rise to the occasion? I still believe we can.

Saño's speech moved people to tears in the overflow hall where I sat. His words drew up a glaring contrast, often noted by its critics, between the official COP where middle-aged men (mostly) in suits show up year after year to fumble their mandate to do something historically meaningful, and what we might call "The People's COP," the efforts of global civil society to inject reality and creativity into the discussions.

Inadvertently, Saño became a hero to all of those who wanted real climate action. After his speech, three young activists unfurled a banner of solidarity and escorted him out of the COP. Disgracefully, and in a telling sign of the UNFCCC's increasingly hardline instincts to stifle strong civil society input, Executive Secretary Cristiana Figueres issued a five-year ban to the three. Despite every appeal, they were not allowed to return.

This formed part of a wider pattern of exclusion and dismissal of civil society, which had already taken the form of severely restricting the size of civil society delegations, and would be followed by the Executive Secretary's appearance at the World Coal Association summit a week later as a keynote speaker. When they heard of her plan to do this, the Conference of Youth had told her, "You either get to speak to us or to them. But not both." Figueres would leave Warsaw with her reputation severely damaged in the eyes of a wide swath of civil society.

Saño's dramatic words, and subsequent declaration that he would fast out of solidarity with those left with nothing after the storm, until *something* meaningful came out of this COP, prised one concession out of the negotiators: the creation of a fund for Loss and Damage to provide



immediate relief to those who will be affected by climate disasters in future extreme weather events. The fund has remained empty to this day, and indeed, could be negotiated out of the final Paris text if someone doesn't stand up again for it.

Yeb Saño himself did not return as chief Philippines negotiation to COP 20 in Lima last December, amid speculation that pressure on the government of the Philippines from some undisclosed country or countries had caused his removal.

Instead, inspired like millions of others by Pope Francis's bracing climate encyclical [\*Laudato Si\*](#), he has been helping to build the [People's Pilgrimage](#), which, like the encyclical itself, is open to people of all faiths (including the climate justice faith). As he has [said](#): "Paris is not our destination. Our real destination will be the hearts and minds of people, so our journey continues even after Paris." In Italy this summer, he told a group I was with that "Paris is merely a six-year delay of what was promised in Copenhagen. Paris will give us a ten to fifteen page 'Motherhood' statement with lots of 'creative ambiguity.' Unless we change the system, the same system that got us into the crisis, the negotiations process cannot, for the life of me, I cannot see it get us out of it."



*Yeb Saño in Delhi, August 2015: "In the face of climate change and all the adversity we have to face in this world, this is not just a journey. It is a battle – one that we cannot afford to lose."* [Source](#).

### **Civil Society Walks Out at COP19 on November 21, 2013**

COP 19 did not go well. Corporations' logos were omnipresent at the conference. Figueres addressed the World Coal Association's summit, negotiations remained stalled. By the second to last day of COP 18 we had had enough. There was a call for civil society to turn its back on this COP and leave it, and leave it is precisely what we did.

Seeing no meaningful progress in the talks, finding themselves excluded from the process on many levels, and witnessing the blatant corporate presence – even sponsorship – at the COP, hundreds of activists staged a walkout from the National Stadium, most of them vowing not to set foot in it again. Estimates of the crowd's size ranged from 300 (undoubtedly an underestimate, as 300 white t-shirts were distributed before the action and hundreds of those who walked out didn't have them) to a high estimate of 800. By any reckoning, a significant portion

of all civil society delegates to COP19 simply walked out. There were about 8,300 participants at COP19, and of these approximately 1,500 were representatives of civil society NGOs and organizations.

Summer Gray and Corrie Ellis from our UC Santa Barbara-based Climate Justice Project made a [video](#) that captures the elevated mood of the participants as they turned their backs on the Warsaw COP.



*Demonstrating outside the COP after the walkout. Photo: John Foran*

The walkout was conceived and planned by some of the radical young activists and youth organizations, but it came to enjoy broad appeal (it had a predecessor in the mass walkout of civil society at the Rio+20 meetings in Brazil in June 2013). In addition, veteran organizers from Friends of the Earth, Oxfam, ActionAid, the Pan African Climate Justice Alliance, the Bolivian Platform on Climate Change, LDC Watch, the International Trade Union Confederation, the Philippines Movement on Climate Change, and (unexpectedly) the World Wildlife Fund, among others, lent the names of their organizations to the action, and Kumi Naidoo, the executive director of Greenpeace, turned up to deliver the principal [remarks](#) at the press conference that preceded the walkout.

At 2 p.m. precisely, groups of activists who had met up in many corners of the cavernous National Stadium started to walk out, converging on the ground level of the building which led to the exits. We filmed as they streamed by, in their hundreds, happy with their decision. The mood was defiant; the white shirts said “Polluters talk, we walk!” and on their backs, “Volveremos!” (“We will be back.”) The messages were clear, passing judgment on the

complete inability of the UNFCCC to advance the treaty process at COP19, and signaling that this walkout was tactical, that the movement would return, with renewed force, to the 2014 COP20 in Lima, Peru, in the hope that Latin American civil society and the governments of Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Cuba, and others might make their more radical demands for climate justice heard and felt inside the COP.

Lima, however, and the several intersessional negotiating rounds of 2015 have yielded meager returns in the form of an unwieldy treaty text with all of the long-standing sticking points – most of them to do with the demands of climate justice – still in brackets.

### **A High Stakes Dinner Party in Paris in Four Weeks**

This brings us to COP 21, which opens on Monday November 30 in Paris and ends two weeks later on Friday, December 11 (unless it goes a day or two extra while negotiators scramble for some kind of face-saving formula to present to the world). I have no illusions about the outcome of the Paris COP, and have [argued](#) that we should “Just Say ‘No’ to the COP.”

Meanwhile, as a humorous introduction to what’s on the menu (and in this moment of humanity-wide existential crisis, a sense of humor is a useful quality to possess), *Grist* magazine’s Ben Aldern revisits COP history and offers this mouth-watering [video preview](#) of what’s to come.



Click [here](#), not above!

I intend to follow up this “video history” of the COP with two preview pieces on what we might see in Paris, one on the state of the negotiations, and one on the preparations of the global climate justice movement, in the weeks to come.

Like it or not, we have a date in Paris, and I hope these video vignettes of the high points of the past get you in the right mood for it. What mood will you be in when our date with history rolls around? Please let us know!