With much fanfare, in 2015, under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), The 21st Convention of Parties (COP21) adopted The Paris Agreement as a plan for global action to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and to adapt to the unavoidable impacts from climate change. Three years later, COP24 took place December 1-14, 2018, in Katowice Poland. After tense moments and hard work of the negotiators lasting into early morning hours, the “rulebook” for the Paris Agreement was largely finalized. Such negotiations can often seem opaque and complex. However, the actions taken or not taken at these meetings affect us all, especially the young people whose lives will be shaped by today's decisions.
To support youth engagement with the international negotiations, we developed and co-taught an international and multi-institution graduate seminar on international climate policy based on our own experiences as AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellows. The class was designed to enhance student experience during the COP negotiations. Drawing upon our own science and diplomacy experiences as fellows and partnering with other institutions and with International Youth and Student Movement for the United Nations (ISMUN) we led the students through the history, the structure of the UN bodies, and the issues under negotiation as well as the practicalities of the Conventions. Uniquely, this class adopted a strong experiential focus with the students attending the COP. At the COP, the students ran their own official side event, presenting on research related to food waste, recycling, water and energy utilization and advocacy on their institution’s campuses https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgKaNgunHYLBQ1sCMyEwnuQ and ISMUN regional member organization Caribbean Youth Environmental Network (CYEN) created a moving rap video “1.5 to Stay Alive” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egroQkw-ZWE articulating the crisis facing small island states.

Being at a live COP allows for moments that could never be captured by teaching international environmental diplomacy in a classroom. This year, it was the tension of a room as country after country stated its support, or its refusal to support, a single word in a 123-page document. In Paris, countries had agreed that global action needed to be ambitious with differentiated but equal responsibilities in reducing global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius. While countries were developing their individual plans, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was tasked with researching scenarios between 2 degrees of warming versus a target of 1.5. In mid-October, the IPCC released a Special Report on 1.5 versus 2.0 degree warming scenarios, highlighting both the impacts of the two warming scenarios and the fact that the world would reach 2.0 degree warming in less than 12 years unless urgent action was taken now. Suddenly, ambitious goals were not ambitious enough, and the combined nationally-determined contributions to reducing greenhouse gases were insufficient to change the current trajectory. With the implementation of the Paris Agreement starting a mere six weeks after the release of the 1.5 report, as the special report came to be known, the ability to reduce greenhouse gases in a way that protects the cultures of many sea level small island states as well as numerous cities in developing and developed countries, seemed unreachable. “1.5 to Stay Alive” became a rallying cry.

The industrial city of Katowice was once the largest producer of coal in Poland. Coal is still the major fuel source for city residents, and early morning mists held the smoke and dust from the coal-fired home furnaces. Inside the Katowice Convention Center that sits on top of an abandoned coal field, an argument on acknowledging the role and science of the 1.5 Report threatened to derail the entire Paris Agreement. One word, in diplomatic speak, shifted the importance of the science findings in the report from one of welcome to one of merely noting the report’s existence. In class, we discussed the findings from this report. In the plenary hall, these students were stunned to hear countries argue over two word: “noted” versus “welcomes”. The grammatical difference seemed to them to be minor. They struggled with the diplomatic importance of embracing a scientific finding and acting on it versus noting the report merely exists. Yet the entire COP was effectively halted for three days over various arguments on how the 1.5 Report, which the UNFCCC itself had ordered, was to be recognized within the framework of the Paris Agreement. When UN Rule 16 was invoked for lack of consensus thus suspending the meeting for an undetermined period of time and bringing the lively debate to a full stop, attending students were stunned.

Consensus, as the backbone mantra of the UN system, depends on coalitions bringing agreement or compromise to text through informal meetings, or as in Katowice, “Informal informals” (locally known as coffee gatherings). Evoking Rule 16, suspension of an item due to lack of consensus, meant that
numerous “informal informals” failed to gain consensus and even the Polish President of the COP’s own attempt at compromise language failed. Although noting a report acknowledges its existence, the failure to welcome the report—or accepts its findings—meant that countries did not have to address the inability of the Paris Agreement stipulations (equal but differentiated) to meet its own ambitious goals. Failure to accept the 1.5 report could doom small islands, such as Marshall Islands and Tuvalu, to certain cultural extinction as 2 degrees of warming scenarios predicted rising sea levels would overwhelm those islands in 12 years or less.

In the hours before midnight on Sunday, two days of marathon negotiations after the expected close of the COP, compromise language was finally reached. Since the moment when one word had brought negotiations to a standstill, the hallways of the convention center were still crowded; small couches along the walls were still filled with collapsed figures in full suits. The line for the coffee stands wound its way across the entrance hall and a dreary winter drizzle darkened the windows. The Secretary General of the UN had returned the day before and met with the civil society observers. He observed that the youth were indeed the answer to climate change as he gave a tired laugh about the negotiators asleep in the halls. In 12 years, he said, the youth here will be addressing the findings of the 1.5 Report as the negotiators and the authors of future such reports.

Will sufficient progress be made? By providing our students with the skills and know-how to navigate the COP and harnessing their energy and innovativeness, we hope that we are contributing to this goal of “1.5 to Stay Alive!”

Image by Gillian Bowser (featuring Nycole Scheverria, Shelby Mcclelland and Sarah Whipple)

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- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egroQkw-ZWE