

International Federation of Environmental Journalists (IFEJ) Congress 2009

“Bridging North-South Differences in Reporting Climate Change: Journalists’ Role in Reaching an Agreement at COP15 in Copenhagen”

India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, October 28-30, 2009

At the inaugural session, IFEJ President Darryl D’Monte cited how there were only 40 days to Copenhagen and media coverage had reached the ‘tipping point’. The question was whether media was part of the solution – or part of the problem, which the Congress would decide. However, instead of talking *at* each other, journalists were encouraged *to* talk to each other.

One of the cardinal issues which accounted for a divide was the absence in reporting in the Northern media of the 1.3 billion people in the Indo-Gangetic plains who were the most numerous to be impacted by climate change. The decline of Himalayan glaciers and the controversial phenomenon called the Asian Brown Cloud were also major issues.

Danish Ambassador to India Ole Lonsmann Poulsen referred to how there had been a 50% increase in the green economy in the last five years. He cautioned against a negative social and environmental attitude, which would lead to a failure to combat climate change. Media could play a pivotal role to create awareness among people as well as in the negotiations and exhorted the media to move from “controversy to compromise”.

Sunita Narain, Director of the Centre for Science & Environment (CSE), in the first Keynote address, likened the debate over climate change to a conversation in a divided world. She demolished myths, beginning with the belief that setting a target of cutting emissions by 80% by 2050 would solve the problem, which it would not, because emissions were still rising and it would be too late by then.

The second was that India and China had to be brought on board to solve the crisis. Industrial countries were responsible for historical emissions, which is why developing countries were asking for their share of ecological space, which meant a share in economic development.

Bryan Walsh from *Time* magazine into the US delivered the second Keynote address and cited how the US had now become concerned about introducing domestic climate change legislation as a prelude to Copenhagen. This marked a decisive change in US on climate, under President Obama.

However, he also cautioned: “So does that mean it’s clear sailing from here to Copenhagen? I wish that were the case. That’s because far from being poised to finally lead on climate change, there’s a risk that the U.S. could see a backlash against global warming policies at home. While the people in power in Washington have changed over the past year, the political realities they need to contend with at home and abroad have not...

“And neither, possibility is the American public. There’s been a notable backslide in public concern over global warming in the U.S. We assumed that after the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s groundbreaking assessment in 2007, the scientific case on global warming was definitively closed. I certainly wrote that, and I imagine so did many of you. But not every American has heard the message.

“A poll released last week by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center found that just 57% of Americans polled believe that the Earth is actually getting warmer—down from 71% in a similar poll held in April 2008. Incredibly, just 37% of Americans say that the Earth is getting warmer due to the burning of fossil fuels

and other manmade causes—down from 47% last year. And altogether just 35% of Americans believe climate change is a very serious problem, down from 44%.”

The second session took the discussion further with several print journalists from around the world: Martin Aagard Jensen from *Politiken* in Denmark, Kunda Dixit from *The Nepal Times*, James Fahn from Internews in Thailand, Herve Kempf from *Le Monde* and Mats Hellmark from *Swedish Nature*.

The third session was addressed by Girish Sant, from the Prayas Energy Group and think-tank in Pune, which described in some detail how India was already following a low-carbon energy path.

This was followed by a discussion on North-South issues between TV journalists, chaired by Nalaka Gunawardene of Television for Education in Sri Lanka. Jesper Bulow Zolk of *TV2* news in Copenhagen and Bahar Dutt of *CNN/IBN* news channel in Delhi took part and showed some clips of their work on climate.

The second day witnessed a quick change of sessions, with the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi briefings on Delhi’s Bus rapid Transit System (BRTS) substituting for Prof Iqbal Syed Hasnain, who was not available. This recounted in some detail both Delhi’s campaign to substitute CNG for all public vehicles, which Anumita Ropy-Chowdhry of the CSE detailed, and was followed by Prof Geetam Tiwari of IITD describing the BRTS initiative, including the media criticism.

The next session also had to be substituted by a general discussion among journalists on North-South issues and professional problems – not least the imminent decline, if not demise, of much the mainstream media in the North.

The following session witnessed a lively panel discussion between Kunda Dixit, Martin Aagard Jensen, Herve Kempf, Raj Chengappa *of India Today*, Mats Hellmark and Jesper Bulow Zolk, who fielded questions from the audience on their respective journal's or channel's coverage of climate issues.

The day's last session was addressed by Satinder Bindra, Director of Information & Communications, UNEP, Nairobi, who described his switch-over from a professional TV journalist to heading communications at UNEP. He provided details of the agency's "Seal the Deal" campaign and showed a short clip.

On the third and final day, Oxfam had its session on Adaptation, which is generally neglected in the media, both in the North – and, to an extent, in the South. Dr Prodipto Ghosh, former Secretary in the Ministry of Environment & Forests, chaired the briefing but also fielded questions on India's position on climate change as a member of the current Indian delegation on climate negotiations.

Prof Santosh Kumar from the National Institute of Disaster Management spoke about adaptation interventions in disaster-prone areas, while Aditi Kapoor from Oxfam India spoke about Adaptation & UNFCCC.

This was followed by a presentation by the World Wide Fund for Nature and Birla Institute of Technology, with Prof Rajesh Kumar, on how central Himalayan

Glaciers were witnessing change. He described how the Gangotri glacier, which he had been studying, had retreated by some 23 metres per year from 1971-1976, which had dropped to an average of 6 metres a year between 1999 and 2006.

The next session was taken by Prof V. Ramanathan from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California at San Diego, on “Does the Atmospheric Brown Cloud exist over South Asia and what are its impacts?” He proved in no uncertain terms that it was the case, although he clarified that this phenomenon ought in no way, during the ongoing negotiations, place the burden on developing countries to take on emission cuts. Industrial countries were responsible for historical emissions in the atmosphere and had to bear the biggest burden.

Field Trip to Leh:

Some 40 journalists travelled to Leh, the capital of Ladakh district in Jammu & Kashmir state, to observe the decline of glaciers first-hand.

They were briefed by Nisa Khatoon, from WWF in Leh, who emphasized how ordinary people’s own observations added to scientific evidence on the glacial retreat.

Journalists travelled to the Khardungla pass, which was 18,000 ft high, to witness the decline of a glacier which was the primary source of water for Leh town.

At the instance of the District Commissioner, Ajit Kumar Sahu, journalists were briefed by a range of officials and NGOs on a subsequent day. These included O.P. Churasia from the Defence Institute for High Altitude Research, Tundup Angmo from Geres (Group for Environment, Renewable Energy and Solidarity), Chewang Norphel from the Leh Nutrition Project and Dr B. Balaji from the Ladakh Forest Division.

Another day, Norphel accompanied participants to the site where head constructed an artificial glacier and took them to a village where residents had benefited from this novel experiment.

The participants were also able to do some sight-seeing in and around Leh, including the ancient palace, monasteries and the Indus river. (ends)