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Notes from a Climate Change Convention

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Last December, with funding from a SAEF grant, I traveled to Katowice, Poland, to attend COP24 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The COP, or Conference of Parties, is the annual meeting where negotiators, scientists, heads of state agencies, activists, and other leaders gather to discuss the global effort to address climate change. They take stock of progress and challenges, share knowledge and ideas, and discuss how to move forward.

For somebody interested in the science, policy, and law of climate change, I felt there was no better chance to observe how international climate negotiations function. The mandate of COP24 was to agree on a set of rules to govern the implementation of the Paris Agreement, which was negotiated in 2015 in Paris at COP21. I was present for the second week, when negotiators had consistently been missing deadlines for draft texts, and the deadline for the final agreement was quickly approaching. Ultimately, a compromise was reached, but it fell short of what civil society, NGOs, and many negotiators thought necessary.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's special report on the impacts of 1.5°C of warming above pre-industrial levels was a specter throughout the COP. The report describes the clear dangers associated with allowing warming to exceed 1.5°C and outlines how avoiding those dangers will require unprecedented transitions in all aspects of society. Attending COP24 only drove home the inability of the United Nations climate regime to bring about these transitions without other much larger structural changes—and the importance of working toward that change at many different levels.

My time at the COP continues to inform my studies and my plans to work on issues related to climate change in the future. I'm very grateful for the experience. I would strongly encourage others to apply for SAEF grants to pursue activities that are important to them.

