

The 21st United Nations Conference of the Parties on Climate Change and the Climate Summit for Local Leaders



A report from David Ullrich | December 4, 2015

“The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago, and the second best time is now.” – Chinese Proverb

The 21st Conference of the Parties on Climate Change was held in Paris in December 2015. Among the activities scheduled was the Climate Summit for Local Leaders, which gathered mayors and other representatives of local governments from all around the world. Why? Not only because cities hold over the half of the Earth’s population and produce 70% of total greenhouse gas, but also because they are a central part of the solution.

On December 4th, 2015, representatives from over 640 cities across 115 countries, including 446 mayors, attended this event, which was hosted by the Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, and Special Envoy for Cities and Climate Change and former mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg. Mitch Twolan, Cities Initiative Chair and Mayor of Huron-Kinloss, ON and David Ullrich, Cities Initiative Executive Director, both represented the 119 members of GLSLCI. Member mayors George Heartwell (Grand Rapids), Denis Coderre (Montreal), John Tory (Toronto) and Roger Anderson, Regional Chair of Durham Region, were also present.

Mayor Bloomberg opened the conference by saying that the “attendees were there not to make history, but to shape the future”. He stated that Mayors have the authority to act; that they should act; and that national governments must recognize mayors’ role in making change. The speakers showed that mayors are taking action: the City of Los Angeles plans to be off coal by 2025; Bordeaux brings nature into its urban fabric; Vancouver hopes to rely on 100% renewable energy by 2050; Berlin is banning high-emission vehicles in the central city; and Mexico invests 10% of its budget in the environment.

During this conference, national leaders spoke to the assembly about

actions taken at the highest levels of government. The French President François Hollande announced that France is increasing its climate funding contributions from \$2 billion per year to \$5 billion, and the Chinese government’s special envoy spoke about the nation’s 5 year plan to reduce its use of coal by 20%.

Other influential speakers added their voice to those of the elected officials. Actor and Philanthropist Leonardo DiCaprio urged local leaders not to wait for central governments before taking action, and Robert Redford added that mayors are closer to the issues, people and climate change. He hopes that climate change will become less politicized and that artists will take the opportunity to illustrate this pressing issue. Thomas Bach, President of the International Olympic Committee, highlighted that the Olympic Games can catalyze sustainability in host cities. The CEO of Unilever underlined that the cost of inaction exceeds the cost of action, and Former Vice President Al Gore announced that the use of solar energy has increased globally by 78% in the past year.

Despite an optimistic tone, speakers agreed that needs are tremendous. Globally, an investment of \$100 billion per year is required by 2020 in order to achieve these ambitious goals. Cities need to be given flexibility in problem solving and also need access to financing. Former Vice President Gore emphasized that cities deserve a seat at the table and need to lead by example – these guiding principles are those that the Cities Initiative shares. Cities will need to work in community and collaboration with many stakeholders, including the private sector. Overall, solidarity in action will be necessary.

The summit was punctuated by the adoption of the Paris City Hall Declaration, which expressed city leaders’ commitment to fighting climate change and called for an ambitious agreement among nations.



Mayors at the Climate Summit for local leaders | Photo Credit: C40