Optimistic or pessimistic about the Copenhagen climate talks? | Copen-talk... http://www.grist.org/article/2009-12-01-panel-of-smarties-optimistic-or-...
before. I am optimistic that our leaders will pull out the stops when the eyes of the world turn to Denmark, and that we will arrive at innovative solutions for sharing this burden, curbing deforestation, and leveraging finance and resources for adaptation, technology transfer, and capacity building.

Maybe this hope is misinformed or nearsighted because I am currently up to my eyeballs in this energetic, colorful, and inspiring movement. I’m open to criticism.

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**Alex Steffen**
Executive editor of Worldchanging.org

It seems worthwhile to try and offer some perspective on what Copenhagen is and isn’t, at least as it looks to me.

Copenhagen is not the moment when we get a signed treaty. It’s also not the moment of the U.S. finally stepping into a leadership role on climate. It probably won’t even be the moment when President Obama stands next to the other heads of state and takes the “World leaders express grave concern” photo.

It seems to me that what the Copenhagen moment is, though, is something profound: it is essentially the first time the entire world has come together at multiple levels—national governments, cities, businesses, networks of individual citizens—to start tackling our planetary crisis. This is the first meeting of the rescue committee.

Up until now, every other international environmental and climate meeting has been hampered by doubts, or denialists, or just the partial commitment of the governments involved. Up until now, selling the need for action has been part of the agenda, and has usually take up most of the debate.

That’s no longer true here: With the exception of U.S conservatives, the debate is over (and they’re the Taliban of climate science, ostracized as ignorant on the international stage). Again, with the exception of the U.S., the highest levels of government are involved and in many cases committed to action, if in a heavily caveated way. And, in a really major way, climate action has begun to coalesce on a set of principles (atmospheric concentration targets, climate equity, etc.) that offer the hope of some rapid change, and that are being taken up by actors at a number of levels. (I personally think the attendance of the mayors of most of the world’s largest cities, from Tokyo to New York to Sao Paolo, is probably more important than the attendance of some U.S. senators.)

Copenhagen may not be the signing moment, but it may still be the defining moment.

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**Sanjay Khanna**
Climate journalist and Huffington Post blogger

Copenhagen is unlikely to deliver the “fair, ambitious, and binding” agreement that TckTckTck and other NGOs are demanding. If Copenhagen does indeed fail, I hope that one positive outcome may be that more people begin to prepare in the months and years ahead for political failure to converge with increasing economic, social and climatic instability.

My greatest concern is that the failure of a substantive agreement in Copenhagen may mean an increase in anxiety and depression among people who realize that our collective response is not proportional to the threat of climate change. A rise in despair and anguish would be a logical outcome of continued failures in global climate negotiations—which may imply that all of us will need to take better care of ourselves and others in order to deal with the psychological and social toll of continued political conflict around climate-crisis issues. Consider that the degradation of mental health in response to a worsening global climate would affect citizens’ abilities to think well and to solve problems, something that would slow down even efforts to adapt to climate change, let alone mitigate it.

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**Neil Tangri**
Director of the Waste and Climate Change campaign at the Global Anti-Incinerator Alliance
For those who think that Copenhagen is our last best shot, the outlook is grim. The U.S. and other rich countries are desperately trying to take a legally binding deal off the table. And if there is a deal, it is unlikely to meet either of the two basic minimum requirements: (1) reduce emissions fast and far enough to keep the globe from going into climate crisis; and (2) be fundamentally equitable.

Many folks, on the other hand, think that the climate movement is gathering steam; governments are finally starting to take the problem seriously; the biggest players (like U.S. and China) are finally starting to make concessions; and so we're much better off delaying 6 to 12 months for a better deal. So the news that a binding deal will be put off actually may be cause for cautious optimism.

And then there are those who think that today's governments are never going to be able to solve the problem—they are simply too compromised. In order to address both the climate crisis and the inequity crisis, we need a fundamental reordering of the global economic system. That will not happen through a series of Band-aids but as a result of crises—including political ones. Copenhagen offers an opportunity to force just such a political crisis through the application of "street heat." The people in the streets will provide a passionate counterbalance to the milquetoast pronouncements of politicians inside.

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Hugh Bartling
Associate professor of public policy at DePaul University in Chicago

The main factor contributing to my optimism is the sophistication of global civil-society networks coordinating around the common purpose of seeing an equitable and effective deal get done. Youth, NGOs, and activist organizations are clearly pushing the policy thinking and negotiation conversations forward. The beauty and strength of these networks lie in their diversity and global reach, which, for me, portend a degree of resiliency. This resiliency means that pressure will continue to be placed on negotiators and national leaders to complete a deal.

My general optimism, however, is tempered with a degree of skepticism around certain happenings. Obama’s mitigation targets are weak and probably not sufficient to meet the demands of the science, and I am concerned about the timing of Obama’s visit to Copenhagen. The high-level segment doesn’t begin until a week after his appearance. Could Obama’s trip actually backfire if he isn’t around to talk to his peers? I am also concerned about the whole issue of valuing forests, respecting the rights of indigenous groups living in forests, and insuring that forest verification and monitoring mechanisms are robust.

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David Turnbull
Director of the Climate Action Network—International

I’ve started to get a reputation amongst the climate folks in Copenhagen of being “the optimist” in the crowd. And yes, despite the scary science, the tough politics, and the immense pressure, I remain optimistic.

Working in a coalition of roughly 500 organizations from dozens of countries around the world has allowed me to interact with some of the most dedicated and brilliant people I could ever imagine, all of whom are devoting their lives to finding a solution to the climate crisis. This gives me hope.

We’ll have a well-oiled advocacy machine in the [Copenhagen conference center] working together to push for the strongest agreement possible. We’re a force to be reckoned with, basing our positions on science, equity, and reason. And governments are already listening.

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Casper ter Kuile
Co-director of the U.K. Youth Climate Coalition

Political leaders successfully coordinated a large-scale lowering of ambition after the Barcelona talks. However, recent emission-reduction targets from the U.S. and China, the personal attendance of a host of global leaders, and financing announcements from the
Commonwealth Summit are again raising expectations for Copenhagen. Campaigners will be trying to build these positive developments into tangible results, but they'll need to engage mainstream public and media pressure to break through existing deadlocks.

Dave Rochlin
CEO of ClimatePath

Anyone hoping for COP15 to be a panacea will be disappointed. But the writing is on the wall, and obstructionism is giving way to begrudging expediency. This means Copenhagen could be either a victory or tragedy, depending how far and fast the participants are willing to go vs. how far and fast we need to go to avoid some of the more calamitous scenarios.