

COP27: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Healing Divisions and Building Greater Unity in the Climate Movement

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I was fortunate to attend the COP27 UN Climate Change Conference in Sharm El Sheikh in Egypt in November 2022. I was part of a delegation with Sustaining All Life (SAL), a project of Re-evaluation Counseling, an international peer-counseling organization. In SAL, we believe that it is possible to limit the effects of human-caused climate change and restore the environment. We also understand that big changes are needed if this is to happen. We believe these changes will require a massive movement of people from every background, spanning the globe. The barriers to building a sufficiently large and powerful movement include the divisions, usually caused by oppression, among nations and among groups of people in those nations.

People often think of Sharm El Sheikh as a resort community. Our delegation, however, was staying miles from the conference site in accommodations that often had no hot water, sleeping in beds that required mosquito netting. Each day we had a mile-long walk and a lengthy bus ride to get to the conference site. Yet, each day our spirits were lifted as we arrived and saw the colorful sculptures and environment-friendly buildings that the Egyptian government erected just days before the conference began. We would walk among 30,000 delegates, hearing languages spoken from all over the world and know we were part of a growing global community of climate activists.

Countries of the Global South disproportionately feel the effects of climate change, particularly in Africa, so we made sure that the majority of our SAL delegation came from African countries. We had delegates from Egypt, Eswatini, DR Congo, Haiti, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Morocco, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Togo as well as a few delegates from Canada, the Netherlands, the UK, and the United States. We benefited not only by our delegates from Africa leading our delegation but also by their willingness to tell their stories about the devastating impact of climate change in their countries.

I was one of only five white people in our delegation of 33, and two of the five were Jews. It was a profound experience to participate in a group effort to make the issue of racism a central part of the international work on climate change. For many years, I have worked with US environment organizations, helping them to heal the legacy of racism and move toward creating organizations that are more inclusive, especially given that in the US, environmental activism has often been a predominantly white-led movement. In contrast, our delegation was overwhelmingly comprised of People of Color.

The need for the climate movement to face the racism directed at African countries became apparent well before we arrived in Sharm El Sheikh. In getting ready for the conference, I was able to simply go online, fill out a form, and obtain the required visa to travel to Egypt. My African colleagues did not fare so well. Many of them filled out forms over and over again, which the Egyptian government agency responsible for granting visas kept rejecting. Even just a few weeks before the conference, half of our African delegates had not received visas. A number of them had to stay home because they never received the visas for which they applied. I learned from our African delegates that these attempts to freeze out African participation in conferences were familiar tactics of the Egyptian government. The struggle that many Africans had in just getting to the conference was a heartbreaking reminder of the work still needed to build a climate movement in which those who are most impacted will lead. One night at dinner in an outdoor restaurant in the center of town, we noticed that the service at our table was slower than all the surrounding tables. The only obvious difference we could surmise was that our group included several dark-skinned Black Africans. We will not build a unified climate movement, empowered to take action until we can heal these divisions.

Through offering daily workshops, forums, and listening sessions at the conference, SAL sought to introduce listening practices and tools for healing the effects of oppression. Our goal was to meet and build relationships with as many climate activists as possible, learning about each other's work and introducing climate activists to empowering tools to heal from the effects of oppression and build greater unity within our movement. We met hundreds of activists attending the conference, and we learned about their issues through listening projects that we designed. Every morning, two-person teams from our delegation, carrying a white board in Arabic, English, French, and Spanish, would walk among the conference attendees. Each day the white board would pose a new question that we thought activists would want to talk about. The topics of our workshops each day were geared to the questions we asked. Here were some of our questions and the corresponding programs we offered:

- “How have you experienced sexism while doing climate work?”

We asked this question to open conversations with women activists about how climate change has had a particularly devastating effect on the lives of women and inviting them to a workshop on the topic of Women and Climate Justice.

- “When were you treated well as a young person doing climate work?”
“When were you not listened to or respected as a young person doing climate work?”

We asked these questions to engage with young people at the conference committed to climate activism, inviting them to a workshop on the topic of Young People at the Forefront of the Climate Movement.

- “When is a time you or your people have experienced personal trauma as a result of the climate crisis?”

We asked this question to provide a safe place for people to speak about their own personal experiences of trauma connected to climate change, inviting them to a workshop on the topic of Healing the Trauma of the Climate Crisis.

- “How has colonialism and racism in Africa personally impacted you and your people?”

We asked this question to reach out to African climate activists, inviting them to a workshop on the topic of the Legacy of Colonialism and Racism in Africa.

I want to specifically highlight a few of my experiences at the conference as a woman and as a Jew. I spoke with women at the conference of all ages and backgrounds about sexism in climate work. I found that the women from Egypt in particular were most reluctant to speak about sexism or even admit it exists in Egypt. Finally, an Egyptian journalist said, “I cannot openly speak about my experiences with sexism. We risk being arrested if we criticize our government.” In light of her remarks, it is worth noting that the Egyptian government only allowed small demonstrations to take place at a designated area miles away from the center of the conference.

As a Jew, I reached out to the large delegation of Israelis at the conference. In recent years, many highly visible conferences promoting LGBTQ+ liberation, women’s liberation and Black liberation have been derailed by attacks on Israel, singling Israel out for condemnation and shutting Jews out of progressive coalitions if they have any connection to Israel or Israelis. I hoped to keep the international climate movement from replicating these divisions. I led a session for our delegation on antisemitism. If talk about Israel came up during the conference, I wanted my colleagues to be clear that criticisms of the policies of the Israeli government are not necessarily antisemitic, but treating Israel differently than any other country could be a form of antisemitism.

One of our listening projects posed the question, “How would your life be different if there were no human enemies?” I asked conference participants if they were taught growing up that they had an “enemy.” I was able to have meaningful conversations with many people, particularly with Egyptian climate activists. Many of us had been told, as Arabs and Jews, that we were each other’s “enemy.” What powerful climate work we could do together if we no longer believed those divisive messages.

It was not always easy being in Sharm El Sheikh. There is much work still to be done to build a united international climate movement. The need to focus on racism and the Global South remains a key issue. At the same time, I met so many people eager to listen to each other and find ways to heal our divisions so we can work together.

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