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Law students try to shift climate policy in Copenhagen

Karen Sloan
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As most law students cram this week for their impending final exams, a pair of 2Ls from the University of California, Berkeley School of Law will make the rounds at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen discussing their research on climate change and human rights.

Meanwhile, six students from the University of California at Los Angeles School of Law will attend the first week of the conference as delegates, having spent a semester preparing for the trip. The students were specially picked for a class designed around the conference and taught by Cara Horowitz, executive director of the law school's Emmett Center on Climate Change and the Environment, which was launched in 2008.

The Berkeley students, Zoe Loftus-Farren and Caitrín McKiernan, wrote and will deliver a research paper urging policymakers to take into account the human implications of climate change. For example, rising sea levels may force relocation of coastal communities, Loftus-Farren said. If that happens, how will the world protect the rights of displaced people to things like clean water and shelter?

The paper urges the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to clarify existing human rights standards so that countries can apply those standards when making climate change policy. It also calls upon the international community to share information and technical assistance in order to establish climate change policies that also protect human rights.

"Well-intentioned policies to address climate change may increase human suffering. We want to ensure climate change policy protects the planet and protect people," McKiernan said.

Their work caught the eye of former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson, a former president of Ireland. The students will accompany Robinson to several events during the Copenhagen conference and will present their findings at a side event.

"It's thrilling," McKiernan said. "This issue is one of the biggest in the news this year, and for two second-year law students to play some part in that is just thrilling."

Loftus-Farren was optimistic about spreading the message to other convention goers, particularly because the topic has been getting more attention from nongovernmental agencies and other organizations.

"I just really hope to spread awareness about the topic and get people talking about it," Loftus-Farren said.

The idea for the project arose during a workshop in May. Laurel Fletcher, director of the International Human Rights Law Clinic at Berkeley, decided that the clinic should prepare a research paper as a class assignment. Loftus-Farren and McKiernan spent four months sifting the research and writing the paper in time for the Copenhagen conference.

"Our main concern is that there has been insufficient investigation of the human rights impact of the implementation of climate change policies," Loftus-Farren said. "There are policies that will unintentionally infringe on communities around the world."

The UCLA students, who specialize in environmental law, plan to attend many of the conference workshops and have scheduled meetings with various groups, including the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Staff reporter Amanda Bronstad in Los Angeles contributed to this report.



Caitrín McKiernan and Zoe Loftus-Farren

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