

New role with MRCTI comes with Goals to address the impacts of climate state at COP28

Reflections from Dubai



I serve as one of the two national co-chairs of the organization, Mississippi River Cities & Towns Initiative (MRCTI). Within that role, I represent the 105 cities that make up the organization along the Mississippi River corridor from Bemidji, Minnesota to New Orleans, Louisiana. Among the goals of this organization is to comprehensively address the impacts of climate change along the entire corridor and throughout the Mississippi River basin, an area that includes 31 states and 2 provinces. It was in this role that I traveled to Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE) to participate in COP28 at the end of last year.

I was among many who attended the COP in Dubai despite feeling skeptical about outcomes. Those dubious feelings could be directly attributed to the status of the UAE as a major link in the global oil commodity supply chain. With the urgency of effectively acting on climate change has become ever more apparent, so has the conviction of most that any sustainable path forward must include reduction in the use of fossil fuels. Many were wondering openly about the disinclination of the COP28 president, Dr. Sultan al-Jaber to entertain fossil fuel reduction in any measure. While Dr. al-Jaber is the UAE environment minister, he is also the CEO of Abu Dhabi National Oil Company. The announcement that came at the very end of COP28 that a consensus on reduction of fossil fuels had been reached was nothing short of remarkable.

One of the most significant changes to the COP this year in Dubai was the addition of the Local Climate Action Summit (LCAS). This was an engagement of local leaders for the first time to gain a greater level of achievement in climate mitigation strategies and an acknowledgement that clear and attestable results come from those who are addressing climate change at the local level. Hosted by the COP28 Presidency and Bloomberg Philanthropies, the LCAS brought together hundreds of national and subnational climate leaders to transform climate finance, enhance global action, fast-track the energy transition, and strengthen resilience and adaptation at the local level. This gathering of local leaders from around the globe emphasized the importance of collective action at all government levels to tackle the climate crisis effectively. Among the aims of the Summit was to identify how transformative local actions could translate globally as well as how to boost local resilience and adaptation to climate change. I was able to not only gain insight on how to better address resiliency in our community and region but also was able to share the remarkable progress La Crosse has made through adoption of the Climate Action Plan, among other successes.

During the many days of sessions involving the hundreds of local leaders from around the world, we were involved in numerous conversations involving a heavy emphasis on natural infrastructure and deployment of that infrastructure to mitigate impacts of drought and flooding and increase resiliency in communities. Natural infrastructure improvements help a community become more resilient in addressing the impacts of climate change by providing protection against various climate change hazards. By incorporating natural infrastructure alongside traditional infrastructure, communities can reduce direct losses, lower indirect costs of disruption, and enhance the reliability of services. Natural infrastructure like wetlands and other nature-based solutions can complement built structures in enhancing resiliency.

The mayors of MRCTI, in partnership with Ducks Unlimited and others have identified multiple areas along the main stem of the Mississippi to deploy massive natural infrastructure projects. The partnership also has been able to work with a global reinsurance giant to find ways to protect these projects without cost to local taxpayers. Gaining global support for this initiative is critical for maintaining resiliency of communities along the Mississippi but also in the other major river systems around the world. This only creates a more stable and sustainable global community.

One of the areas I sought to continually emphasize during meetings with leaders from around the world was the need to concentrate efforts on achieving better land use management practices. Part of the La Crosse Climate Action Plan acknowledges that higher density areas decrease carbon consumption per capita. Whereas just the opposite is true when there is lower density populations in areas surrounding cities.

Suburban sprawl contributes to climate change in several ways. First, residents of suburbs generally have higher transportation emissions than those who live in more densely populated urban centers. Some of this can be easily explained by just recognizing the abundance of single occupancy vehicle miles accumulated by someone who is constantly driving to and from an urban center versus those who already live there. Higher carbon footprints of those living in suburbs can also be partially explained by examining the higher incomes of those who live in those areas. People with higher incomes tend to have a disproportionate level of consumption relative to those who have lower incomes. Per capita carbon impact of infrastructure is also notably higher in lower density area, as are carbon impacts of things like heating, wastewater treatment, and even communications.

One of the most significant discussion areas in Dubai in relation to resiliency were those talks centered on water use and conservation as well as how to deal with catastrophic increases in sea levels and how a hotter globe is dramatically increasing instances of drought. Much of the world's freshwater shortages are not caused by a lack of water but rather by a lack of sustainable water management practices. Numerous subnational organizations around the world shared water conservation and protection practices that have showed some promise. Much of these discussions related to the dangers associated with blossoming abundance of plastic waste that threatens water supplies globally.

Unfortunately, the conspicuous use of plastics—especially single-use plastics—shows few signs of slowing globally. The United States has the inauspicious honor of being the biggest plastic polluter in the world. This creates a multitude of cataclysmic challenges in numerous areas. The issues that tend to gather the most attention is the impact of plastic waste on marine wildlife. Beyond the strangulations of seals and suffocation of turtles, there is also the larger ecosystem impacts like when, for instance, the ingestion of microplastics by plankton reduces their ability to sequester carbon dioxide. I was proud to highlight the work MRCTI has done along the Mississippi to identify pathways for plastic pollution reduction. Our hope is that demonstrable gains in this area along the Mississippi will result in replicable strategies for all the world's major river systems. Fortunately, organizations like Rotary International has made environmental plastic waste reduction a crusade of sorts. I am pleased that the MRCTI continues to partner with Rotary International on this mission. I also found it very gratifying to sign a mutual agreement with the government of India while in Dubai to engage in information sharing to help both of our nations address river pollution, including through plastic waste reduction strategies.

While we often think of plastic pollution as a waste stream-only issue, there are significant global climate change consequences that are not as frequently considered. Plastics, certainly, are made from fossil fuels and emit greenhouse gases throughout their lifecycle. The very creation of plastics is tremendously fossil fuel-intensive, and the production of plastics could reach 20% of global oil consumption by 2050. Removing plastic wastes comes with its own problems, as incineration of plastics also releases greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. In Dubai, through the LCAS, local communities from around the world shared ideas and strategies to tackle this growing crisis. COP28 also served as a key opportunity for me to advocate with United Nations representatives for subnational representation at the ongoing international plastics pollution agreement talks. The fourth iteration of those negotiations will be held at the end of April in Ottawa. One of the key goals of Mississippi River mayors is to push for language that requires extended producer responsibility of all plastics manufacturers worldwide. It is our position that the burden of plastics pollution cleanup should rest with those that profit from their production and not with the residents of our communities.

The inequities of addressing all aspects of climate change continues to remain a key point of conversation at the UN climate conferences. Environmental justice was a significant focus at COP28 in Dubai and highlighted by numerous events and discussions. The conference addressed critical issues related to climate justice, including the criminalization and violence faced by land and environmental defenders. Activists from different countries described the threats they face and proposed ways to tackle those challenges. Additionally, discussions at COP28 continued to emphasize the importance of a Just Transition that involves the full participation of workers and trade unions to ensure socially just outcomes.

Frequently, calls for climate justice were linked with demands for a Gaza ceasefire, emphasizing the interconnectedness of climate justice and human rights issues. The theme "there's no climate justice without human rights" resonated strongly during the conference. We frequently witnessed activists advocating for respect for Palestinian rights alongside climate justice initiatives. This linkage was particularly poignant for the MRCTI group. Among those in our small contingent was a woman who had made a perilous journey from the West Bank to Dubai via Jordan. For us and many others, she could bear witness to the realities of living within an ongoing apartheid system that has been subjugating, arbitrarily persecuting, oppressing, and humiliating millions of Palestinians for decades. The calls for climate justice and demands for human rights—particularly related to the people in Gaza—resonated deeply with her.

The socioeconomic characteristics of Mississippi River communities tend to vary widely. Accordingly, it can be easy to forget for those who live in the upper Midwest that communities in some parts of the south are disproportionately impacted by the consequences of climate change. Certain communities, particularly those historically marginalized or underserved, bear a heavier burden from climate change impacts, leading to social, economic, and public health disparities. Along with the mayor of Greenville, Mississippi, I was able to continuously advocate for support of addressing these disparities through mitigation efforts and equitable policies to ensure that all can live in fair and healthy communities.

For me, one of those most enduring lessons from COP28 continues to be the seemingly near universal acknowledgement that the efforts we take either locally or globally need to include greater participation by young people. This is not to suggest that there have not been significant actions taken by younger generations to work on resiliency and adaptation solutions for communities around the world. However, those engagements often have been at the behest of those in the seats of power. Frequently the directions have been proscriptive, the objectives performative. At COP28, I was excited to represent one of the very first municipalities in the world to make an early application for the Bloomberg Philanthropies Youth Climate Action Fund. This fund focuses on youth-led initiatives to improve lives and address the challenges of climate change. That does not mean that community-wide engagement is absent from these initiatives, it simply provides an opportunity for young people to provide the direction and complete the projects that they prioritize in this ongoing effort to battle the impacts of climate change.

From initial skepticism to guarded optimism was essentially my journey in relation to COP28. The skepticism that anything substantive could result from a COP in an oil-enriched country, chaired by the CEO of a national oil company? Those concerns were largely alleviated by the first-ever consensus from delegates for fossil fuel reductions. In addition, I found the LCAS engaged local leaders in a tremendously meaningful way. Activating local leaders appeared to be an acknowledgment that any actions taken nationally had to involve the significant works already underway at the local level to deploy resiliency measures. That makes sense. Local leaders know what works in their communities. This approach was heralded as something that helped drive outcomes for the COP. And the outcomes—while never completely satisfactory at COP—were better than I anticipated..