

Looking beyond the science of climate change

Researcher helps students, policymakers understand global negotiations on issue too

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National University of Singapore (NUS) researcher Melissa Low believes that when it comes to saving the planet, it is important for people to understand the process of international climate negotiations along with the science behind climate change.

The 32-year-old research fellow at the NUS Energy Studies Institute has this year given more than 30 talks on climate negotiations to students, policymakers and educators. She has also conducted seminars over the Internet for students in overseas institutions.

“Tackling climate change is not just an environmental issue. There are usually other trade-offs that have to be made, such as in terms of environment and economy,” said Ms Low, who has been observing negotiations at the annual United Nations climate conferences – the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP) – for about a decade.

She said advancements in science and technology mean the environment and the economy do not have to be opposing forces.

Economies can now count on renewable energy to grow instead of just relying on fossil fuel-generated energy.

But switching from fossil fuels to renewables is not just a matter of will – it also requires capital, for example, in terms of infrastructure expenditure and expertise, she added. This is something to which

developing and developed countries have different levels of access.

Said Ms Low, who will pursue a doctoral degree in geography with a focus on the implementation of the Paris Agreement next year: “I see the negotiations at the climate conferences as a great way to help countries implement green policies, in terms of facilitating technology transfer, finance flows, and capacity building.”

Over six weeks in August and September, Ms Low co-organised a training workshop which included a model COP for about 50 educators, young people and policymakers in Singapore.

Participants were divided into groups, with each representing a different country.

“The exercise helped participants take a broader view of environmental issues – how can nations advocate on climate issues, while ensuring they do not alienate their home base?” said Ms Low, citing the French “yellow vest” protests, which were started in response to the government’s decision to raise diesel and carbon taxes.

Ms Low said it is important for people to be aware of this global perspective.

“For advocacy groups, being aware of the constraints nations face at the international level could also make them better at communicating their suggestions and demands for climate action,” she said.

This could include linking problems, such as emissions-intensive industries, with solutions, such as boosting energy efficiency, or research into renewable energy stor-

age solutions, said Ms Low.

Earlier this year, Ms Low, who lives in Serangoon, reached out to the North East Community Development Council about giving a talk on climate change at a grassroots event – a setting unlike the academic and policy environments she is used to.

She recalled being close to tears at the end of the 15-minute session in Tampines because the audience was not engaged.

She had tried to make the topic relatable by focusing on Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s National Day Rally speech, in which he highlighted Singapore’s vulnerability to rising sea levels.

“But I realised I should have addressed issues more relatable to everyday activities, such as reducing the use of plastic bags or encouraging residents to bring their own bags or containers,” said Ms Low. “That experience was challenging, but I learnt something valuable about communicating about climate change.”

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BENEFITS OF A BROADER VIEW

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NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE RESEARCHER MELISSA LOW, on having a global perspective of environmental issues.



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