



## [UN climate negotiators learn to trust at Oxford summer camp](#)

Last updated on 12 November 2014, 11:59 am

Envoys go back to boarding school in effort to build understanding ahead of proposed 2015 climate deal



Pic: tejvan/Flickr

By **Sophie Yeo**

**Tucked away in a small Oxford college this summer, 33 diplomats enjoyed what could be one of history's most important coffee breaks.**

Between the rose garden and chapel of Merton, where TS Eliot spent his student days, men and women used to facing each other down in the hostile world of climate negotiations forged personal bonds that could form the foundations of a UN global warming agreement.

For envoys who spend their lives traveling, an extra week away from their families is no perk.

Yet they voluntarily flew thousands of miles— from Brazil, South Africa, France, Ecuador, DR Congo and the UK among others — to pass the final week of August with the same group of people they spend the rest of the year sniping at.

This little known [diplomatic summer camp](#) is arranged by Benito Muller, a Swiss academic who has been based in Oxford since 1983. This year marked the tenth anniversary of the scheme.

Negotiators speak warmly of the opportunity it provides to leave behind the tensions of the UN negotiating halls and find out what really matters to their international counterparts.

In a sunny room overlooking the River Cherwell, Muller tries to explain the concept of the programme, but it is somewhat amorphous: negotiators meet, present their ideas, engage in longer than average coffee breaks.

On the face of it, there is nothing that would entice a travel-weary negotiator to board yet another plane. But to focus on the agenda is to miss the point.

#### **ANALYSIS: Are the UN climate talks toughest on the planet?**

In the politically and historically fraught environment of the UN, trust is difficult to build and harder to maintain. This programme gives them an opportunity to seek it out in Oxford instead.

“What you need to do is take them away from anything that smacks of a negotiating context—no flags, that sort of thing. The moment they smell negotiations they become negotiators. They put on their negotiating hats and they spout their positions,” says Muller.

“Much of the feedback we get on why it’s helpful is we have very long coffee breaks, we have breakfast, lunch and dinner together—it’s a boarding school type of atmosphere.”

The UN’s climate negotiations are famously acrimonious. Trust, or lack of it, could be the deciding factor in whether countries succeed in signing of a new climate change deal in Paris next year.

But during the week in Oxford, any outcome is fortuitous—the spontaneous result of some of the UN’s most senior negotiators coming together in an informal environment and understanding each other better as a result.



Delegates at the 2012 European Capacity Building Initiative in Oxford (Pic: ECBI)

Muller reckons that the most recent meeting has produced a potential breakthrough on the controversial subject of the timing of countries’ contributions to a the new climate deal.

A [paper](#) written by the participants proposes a five-year cycle of commitments on tackling climate change, accompanied by longer term fixed and indicated targets. He is “quietly confident” that this suggestion will have some influence, with the Brazilians referencing it in their most recent [submission](#).

The programme was also what unlocked movement on the Adaptation Fund and the standing committee on finance.

But the real mark of whether the week has been a success is harder to quantify.

“Some of my funders always want me to put a number to it: trust is 6.3 now, it used to be 6.2, so we have a success,” he jokes.

The best indicator of the week's value, he says, is the calibre of people it attracts, and the fact that they return year after year. The latest camp was attended by 15 developing country negotiations and 18 from developed countries, including Artur Runge-Metzger and Kishan Kumarsingh, the co-chairs of the talks.

## **Priceless**

Trust in the climate talks is the nucleus around which all other successes revolve.

Unfortunately, it depends on something even harder to grasp than the UN's notoriously impenetrable jargon: human relationships. The investment requirements here are not financial, explains Muller.

"The year before Copenhagen, everyone threw money at trust building. It was an amazing waste of money," he says. "The point is it's a very slow process and it's a continuing thing. You can't just have a seminar and then afterwards there's trust."

It is an arduous process, but not an academic one, requiring negotiators to start thinking with the other side of their brains.

"I don't need to have a PhD in psychology to have a feeling of what works and what doesn't," says Muller. It is personality based, he adds: the oft-referenced "Trust" between one country and another is largely a mirage.

It also requires time. What marks out the Oxford programme is that it has been running for ten years, providing a consistent space where relationships can flourish.

But trust is also extremely fragile. After Copenhagen, there was stasis, he says—but relationships have healed since then, with encouraging signs that something "reasonable" could be signed in Paris next year.

Was he concerned that the [spying claims](#) that emerged with the Snowden files would rupture this hard earned trust? For a moment, he says, but mainly it was old news, covered by the Danish press back in 2009: "What I wonder is who's raking that one up, and to what purpose?"

## **Bias**

Muller also dismisses the idea that anyone comes to any climate meeting without some kind of bias. He personally, he says, is "absolutely biased", having worked for years with developing country parties.

"No one has no agenda in this ball game. Everyone is partial to some things. The point is, do people buy who you are?"

But that is okay, he says, as the point of the meeting is not to force any agreement, but just to help these sometime-foes to reach a mutual understanding across the ideological canyon.

His role lies in creating the congenial atmosphere where this can unfold: "Most likely the most important exchanges were the ones where I wasn't there, in the corridors or over a cup of coffee."

The UN climate talks are essentially a roving village of 5,000 people, he says. As they roam across continents, some people will bond, some people won't. Some like each other, some don't.

In this international parish, Oxford provides the space where they can get to know each other as people.

"Just don't ask me who the village idiot is," he jests.

"Who is the village idiot?" I ask.

There is silence. That is how trust works.