A Determination to Carry On at the UN Climate Conference
by Nathan Hultman

The recent UN Climate Conference, held recently in Morocco in November, was the first major meeting of negotiators after last year’s historic agreement was concluded in Paris. In the Paris Agreement, world leaders set out a framework for countries to establish their own climate targets and established a process to encourage increasing ambition in the future – and in doing so, the Agreement raised hopes that climate stabilization might, with great effort, be attainable. As such, this meeting was intended to be the “Conference of Action” in which countries and other actors, including companies, mayors, NGOs and even universities, would begin the implementation of concrete strategies to reach the goals set out in Paris. Over the past year, countries and these other actors have been initiating new efforts to address their emissions and momentum was high as the conference opened on November 6.

The result of the U.S. election, which happened on the second day of the conference, created shock and widespread concern among the delegates and the wider community of people concerned about planetary well-being. Donald Trump had, in the course of the campaign, promised to “cancel” the Paris Agreement, called climate change a hoax perpetuated by the Chinese to undermine U.S. interests, vowed to bring back highly polluting coal-generated electricity, and targeted one of Obama’s key climate actions, the Clean Power Plan. This hostility to climate action on the campaign trail created tremendous uncertainty and unease about how the likely loss of United States leadership – and even the prospect of U.S. opposition – would affect the world’s ability to fix the climate problem.

Nevertheless, by the end of the conference, the outlines of a new strategy had become clear. While countries had been moving forward together, unfortunately one of the leaders fell but the others resolved to continue moving forward with their national plans and their international engagement. In addition, the other actors looked to do what they could to carry forward and support climate action in their own spheres.

To that end, the Center for Global Sustainability (CGS) and UMD School of Public Policy students and faculty were very active at the Marrakech conference. CGS organized three events focusing on the role of the research community in supporting better analysis for policy and integration of this analysis with policy implementation. One particularly notable initiative at the conference was our facilitation of Research for Climate Action, a new global network of universities and research organizations active in linking analysis with policy implementation at all levels. We expect that this organization will serve a much-needed role in advancing research fields in areas related to implementation of climate goals and related sustainable development goals, supporting new entrants from universities in other countries, and establishing tighter linkages between universities around the world and their respective governments.

In subsequent weeks after the conference, two things have become clear. First, while Trump remains deeply unpredictable on this issue, his choices for key advisory and cabinet posts have underscored the likelihood of visible and aggressive action against
the climate agreement and on the domestic regulatory system that underpins near- to medium-term emissions reductions in the U.S. Second, even in this new world of hostile behavior at the U.S. national level, many states, cities and corporations in the U.S. are girding for more aggressive climate action in areas under their control. And it’s equally clear that today, energy markets are far more favorable to clean energy choices than they were even a few years ago: since 2008, wind prices have dropped more than 40 percent, solar PV costs by more than 60 percent and efficient LED lighting costs by more than 90 percent. And even if the new administration wants to ignore facts, rational actors, including those doing long-term capital investments in private companies, are well aware that Trump’s tweets on climate change will not actually change what needs to be done in the world of 2025. During the next few years, the research and policy analysis community can continue to develop new ideas and approaches, grounded in evidence and facts, that will improve our prospects for successful, long-term outcomes.