By Jed Ela, UCLA Law delegation — part of a series of posts on COP 15 from Copenhagen:

Deep in the bowels of COP15, in a temporary, metal-walled conference room nestled like a shipping container into a vast temporary hangar housing national delegation offices, a presenter from Google is apologizing. The Google team has lured fifteen busy NGO leaders away from lobbying delegates for a preview of climate-related technologies, and time's a-wasting as they struggle to hook up the projector and find their presentation on a thumb drive. The audience snickers at the irony (surely a staple in Google offices) of such snafus occurring at a legendary high-tech company. But nobody mentions another, more unsettling irony: that of unreliable office technology being used to present much more crucial climate-engineering technologies, which will affect the lives and health of billions—perhaps even our survival as a species.

Despite the neat rows of national seats in the plenary halls (United States, Uruguay, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu) and back-to-back presidential speeches scheduled until two in the morning, a wanderer could be forgiven for thinking COP15 more a technology conference than a political meeting. After checking their coats, attendees funnel past trade-show booths selling climate-related technologies of all kinds—wind turbines, high-efficiency trains, carbon capture and storage, deforestation monitoring. Amidst the booths, a flat-screen TV displays a public opinion poll: apparently 60% of the public looks to politics, rather than technology, for a solution to climate change. The booth's owner, an NGO, is surely concerned that the promise of so much technology could convince people that the climate crisis can be solved without political engagement. But the poll makes a false distinction. Ever since the preamble to the UNFCCC (the 18-year-old convention on which the Copenhagen proceedings are based) the parties here have pledged to control climate change "through the application of new technologies." And while the variety of issues is immense—days before national leaders are set to appear for speeches, negotiators are still hearing report-backs from specialized contact groups—in almost every case, what's being negotiated are terms for the promotion, provision and financing of technology.

The technologies at issue fall into three main categories, paralleling substantive areas of the negotiations: mitigation, adaptation, and "MRV" (monitoring, reporting and verification). But across town and in side-events here at the Bella Center, another category is discussed: geo-engineering. A report distributed by the Royal Society describes and ranks dozens of methods, from tilling carbonate rocks or

charcoal into soils, to fertilizing oceans, building “artificial trees,” and launching space-mirrors. Across town, Bjørn Lomborg’s “Copenhagen Consensus” group enthusiastically advocates fleets of cloud-seeding ships, but the Royal Society presenters at the Bella Center are more restrained, stressing the uncertainty and potential hazards of each method and the overriding need to reduce CO2 emissions. Effective governance is needed, the report concludes, to ensure that countries do not unilaterally, for instance, blast the stratosphere with thousands of sulfate-filled howitzer shells, without regard for unknown and potentially severe trans-boundary effects.

However dangerous such extreme geoengineering techniques may be, we are wrong to draw categorical lines around them. The premises of the UNFCCC, and climate regulation more generally, are that we have already affected climate, inadvertently; and that must now learn to manage it deliberately, or risk catastrophe. Fossil-fuel burning and forest management are thus part of a continuum with more focused and rapid technologies for climate engineering, and global governance of the latter will be as important as of the former. Indeed, to the extent that more active technologies have the potential for larger or more rapid effects, they require governance which is that much stronger. (A panelist at the Royal Society event noted that already, forum-shopping companies are conducting large-scale ocean-fertilization experiments, even though some national jurisdictions have banned them).

I have my doubts, in the end, that these ever-growing annual UNFCCC meetings—political summits, trade shows, academic conferences, and youth activist festivals rolled into one—will be up to the task of managing our climate. Indeed, I wonder if the job can be handled at all within the current system of nation-states. If governance of the climate-as-artifact is to become either effective enough or democratic enough for the world to accept—and to me, that’s a big if—then I expect it will be through larger, more permanent and more effective international institutions, with concepts of national sovereignty significantly narrower than today’s.