



## What does the UN climate change regime do?

Climate change is inherently global in nature. The emissions of long-lived GHGs into the atmosphere from sources anywhere on the globe will affect atmospheric concentrations. As the dynamics of the climate system are globally integrated, the potential impacts of climate change can affect all parts of the globe. Human emissions of GHGs occur primarily from the production and use of energy by individuals, businesses and governments, and from [land use](#)—these are all activities that are essential for modern life and for raising the standard of living for people everywhere. The composition of the world's atmosphere is impacted by GHG emissions for countries around the world, and the effects of those changes affect everyone. Hence, there is motivation and need for collective, global action under the UNFCCC – global action that calls for decision making at many levels: international – through intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and process –, regional, national, sub-national, and local – including by local governments, individuals, communities, multinational firms and local enterprises.

### Under the UN climate change regime, governments:

- Consider latest scientific information and agree on actions to be taken – collectively and/or individually – e.g. launch national strategies and measures for reducing GHGs and adapting to the expected adverse impacts of climate change, or both;
- Gather and share information on GHG emissions, national policies and best practices, and develop international guidance (e.g., modalities, guidelines, methodologies);
- Cooperate, including by mobilizing and providing finance, technology and capacity-building to developing countries, in support of the planning and implementing of mitigation measures (actions to reduce the emission of GHGs into the atmosphere) as well as adaptation measures (actions needed to respond, increase resilience and reduce vulnerability to the impacts of climate change).

The governments that have ratified the [UNFCCC](#)— known as Parties to the Convention—have met annually as the [Conference of the Parties](#) (the COP) since 1995 to take stock of their progress, monitor the implementation of their obligations and continue talks on how best to tackle climate change. Currently, there are 197 Parties to the Convention.

Governments have also negotiated a protocol to the Convention. The [Kyoto Protocol](#) was agreed in December 1997 in Kyoto, Japan. It includes an obligation and individual legally-binding emission reduction targets for developed countries, as they are responsible for the largest share of current and historical GHG emissions. Since the Protocol's entry into force in 2005, meetings of the [Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol](#) (the CMP) have been held (in conjunction with the annual COP) to review the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol.

Ten years later, on 12 December 2015, governments adopted the Paris Agreement, which entered into force on 4 November 2016. The [Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement](#) (the CMA) shall keep the implementation of the Agreement under regular review. It met for the first time in conjunction with COP 22, held in Marrakesh Morocco, in November 2016.

The Convention established two permanent subsidiary bodies namely the [Subsidiary Body for Implementation](#) (SBI) and the [Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice](#) (SBSTA), to support the COP. The SBI and the SBSTA also serve the CMP and the CMA.

The many [decisions](#) taken by the COP and the CMP at their annual sessions now make up a 'rulebook' (including detailed modalities, procedures and guidelines) for the effective implementation of the Convention and its Kyoto Protocol. Through these decisions, the COP and CMP also established a number of institutional arrangements and specialised bodies, often referred to as 'constituted bodies', to support Parties, such as the [Adaptation Committee](#), the [Standing Committee on Finance](#), the [Technology Executive Committee](#) - and many others. An overview of all Convention and Kyoto Protocol bodies can be found [here](#).

In addition, since 2016, Parties are developing the rulebook for the Paris Agreement through the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Paris Agreement ([APA](#)), the SBSTA and the SBI, with the involvement of various of the constituted bodies and overseen by the COP.

Thus a complex architecture for global climate governance has been developed under the Convention and its Kyoto Protocol and is currently developing under the Paris Agreement.

Under this architecture, Parties agree to further actions as they develop national programmes, plans and measures to mitigate climate change and adapt to its impacts, as well as on support for such actions. The Convention also obliges Parties to share technology, provide financial support and to cooperate in other ways to reduce GHG emissions, especially from energy, transport, industry, agriculture, forestry and waste management, which together produce nearly all GHG emissions attributable to human activities.

The obligations and rules under the UN climate change regime also calls on each Party to [report](#) on its national efforts to combat climate change and to develop [GHG inventories](#) that list its national sources (such as factories and transport) and its sinks (forests and other natural ecosystems that absorb GHGs from the atmosphere).

### What are Parties doing to mitigate climate change?

Under the UNFCCC, and notably under the Kyoto Protocol, developed countries have set economy-wide caps for their national emissions, while developing countries have generally focused on specific programmes and projects.

Following the 2009 Copenhagen Accord and the 2010 Cancun Agreements developed countries have communicated quantified economy-wide emission targets for 2020 and developing countries have agreed to implement [nationally appropriate mitigation actions](#) (NAMAs) with support from developed countries. In addition, developed country Parties to the Kyoto Protocol – at the end of the first commitment period under the Protocol (2008-2012) – adopted a second commitment period with targets for 2013-2020, in the form of the [Doha Amendment](#). For developing countries the Kyoto Protocol's [clean development mechanism](#) (CDM) has been an important avenue of action for these countries to implement project activities that reduce emissions and enhance sinks.

In the process leading up to the Paris Conference all countries, developed and developing, prepared [intended nationally determined contributions](#) (INDCs), which outline national efforts to reduce emissions and increase resilience. As a result, a diversity of efforts was communicated, including absolute and relative quantified national targets, sectoral targets and programmes, and others. The new concept of INDCs was eventually formalized under the Paris Agreement as nationally determined contributions (NDCs), and Parties are requested to prepare and communicate successive NDCs every five years.

Parties to the Convention have also cooperated increasingly to reduce GHG emissions from deforestation in developing countries. Developing countries are encouraged to contribute to mitigation actions in the forest sector by undertaking activities to reduce emissions from [deforestation and forest degradation, conserve forest carbon stocks, implement sustainable management of forests and enhance forest carbon stocks](#) (REDD-plus). The Paris Agreement also recognizes the importance of sinks, including forests and encourages Parties to implement and support the existing [framework of guidance](#) and decisions that has been elaborated on REDD-plus under the Convention over the years.

Emissions from international aviation and maritime transport contribute increasingly to global emissions. To address these emissions, there has been ongoing work in the [International Civil Aviation Organization](#) and the [International Maritime Organization](#), as well as cooperation between these two organizations and the UNFCCC.

All over the world, many measures are being taken to mitigate climate change by countries trying to live up to their commitments under the Convention, the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. According to the Convention, Parties shall take into consideration the specific needs and concerns of developing country Parties arising from the [impacts of response measures](#), a call that is echoed similarly by the Paris Agreement. The Kyoto Protocol commits Parties to strive to minimize adverse economic, social and environmental impacts on other Parties, especially developing country Parties. In order to facilitate assessment and analysis such impacts, and with the view to recommending specific actions, the COP has established a [forum on the impact of the implementation of response measures](#) under the Convention, which is also to serve the Paris Agreement.

### What are market mechanisms?

[Market mechanisms](#) apply economic principles to enhance the cost-effectiveness of mitigation actions. Economic instruments also help to channel flows of finance, technology and capacity-building support, particularly from developed to developing country Parties. These include the three mechanisms established under the Kyoto Protocol – the [Clean Development Mechanism](#) (CDM), [joint implementation](#) (JI) and [international emissions trading](#) (IET) – as well as approaches that Parties are elaborating independently or jointly. Currently the CDM, JI and IET make use of an international system for logging transactions of units, known as the international transaction log.

Under the Convention, Parties have also been developing [new mechanisms](#), including a new market-based mechanism, a framework for various approaches, as well as non-market-based approaches.

The Paris Agreement recognizes the possibility of voluntary [cooperative implementation](#) among Parties to allow for higher ambition and sets out principles – including environmental integrity, transparency and robust accounting – for any cooperation that involves internationally transferal of mitigation outcomes. It establishes a mechanism to contribute to the mitigation of GHG emissions and support sustainable development, and defines a framework for non-market approaches to sustainable development.

## What is adaptation?

Adapting to the adverse effects of climate change is, along with mitigation, a major area of action under the UN Climate Change regime. The world is already experiencing changes in mean temperature, shifts in the seasons and an increasing frequency of extreme weather events. As the climate changes, societies will have to learn to adapt. The faster the climate changes, the harder it could be.

[Adaptation](#), in the simplest terms, refers to the actions that countries will need to take to respond to the impacts of climate change that are already happening, while at the same time preparing for future impacts. It refers to changes in processes, practices and structures that can reduce our vulnerability to climate change impacts, such as sea level rise or food insecurity. It also includes making the most of any beneficial opportunities associated with climate change, such as increased crop yields or longer growing seasons in some regions.

Adaptation solutions take many shapes and forms, depending on the unique context of a community, business, organization, country or region. There is no 'one-size-fits-all-solution'—adaptation can range from building flood defences, setting up early warning systems for cyclones and switching to drought-resistant crops, to redesigning communication systems, business operations and government policies. Many nations and communities are already taking steps to build resilient societies and economies, but far greater action and ambition will be needed to cost effectively manage the risks, both now and in the future.

Successful adaptation activities also call for the effective engagement of stakeholders—including national, regional, multilateral and international organizations, the public and private sectors, and civil society—and the management of knowledge for adaptation at each step.

Parties to the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement recognize that adaptation is a global challenge faced by all with local, subnational, national, regional and international dimensions. It is a key component of the long-term global response to climate change to protect people, livelihoods and ecosystems. Parties acknowledge that adaptation action should follow a country-driven, gender-responsive, participatory and fully transparent approach, considering vulnerable groups, communities and ecosystems, and should be based on and guided by the best available science and, as appropriate, traditional knowledge, knowledge of indigenous peoples and local knowledge systems, with a view to integrating adaptation into relevant socioeconomic and environmental policies and actions.

## Background: What are intended nationally determined contributions?

In the negotiations leading up to the [Paris Agreement](#) governments, at COP 19 in 2013, agreed that they would initiate or intensify domestic preparations for their intended nationally determined contributions ([INDCs](#)) towards achieving the objective of the Convention. At the time, the intention was to avoid a situation in which the Paris Agreement would have been agreed with no specific actions and timeframes for all its Parties. As such, INDCs were intended to cover this gap by inviting countries to outline the climate efforts they would undertake in the context of the Paris Agreement. The word “intended” was meant to indicate that these contributions were “intentions” with a view to formalizing them once the Paris Agreement had been adopted.

By the time of the adoption of the Paris Agreement, almost all Parties to the Convention had submitted their INDCs, all of which have been compiled on the [INDC portal](#). In response to a request by the COP the secretariat prepared a [synthesis report](#) on the aggregate effect of these INDCs. This report was published on 1 November 2015 and [updated in May 2016](#).

## What are nationally determined contributions (NDCs)?

Nationally Determined Contributions, or NDCs, are at the heart of the [Paris Agreement](#). In short, they represent the contribution of each Party towards meeting the objective of this Agreement. For example, NDCs should, in aggregate, set the world on a trajectory towards peaking of global emissions as soon as possible and rapid reductions thereafter towards a balance of emissions and removals. This is why, through their NDCs, each Party should specify, among other things, its plans to reduce its emissions.

The Paris Agreement requires each Party to prepare, communicate and maintain successive NDCs that it intends to achieve, and to pursue domestic mitigation measures, with the aim of achieving the objectives of such contributions. Parties are expected to do so every five years and to aim at increasing their ambition with each subsequent NDC. Further, the Paris Agreement expects developed country Parties to lead by undertaking economy-wide absolute emission reduction targets and encourages developing country Parties to move towards such targets over time, in the light of different national circumstances.

The decision adopting the Paris Agreement ([Decision 1/CP.21](#)) specifies that the first NDC of each Party will be its INDC at the time of ratification of the Paris Agreement, unless the Party decides otherwise. A Party, for example, may decide to revise its INDC and communicate a revision as its first NDC.

Parties should also submit and periodically update adaptation communications, which may be submitted as a component of a nationally determined contribution.

With a view to providing clarity on what each country's NDC means, the COP specified several types of information, which include, for example, benchmarks of past emissions, periods (time frames) of implementation, assumptions and technical information, and an explanation of how the contributions is ambitious, fair and contributes towards achieving the objective of the Convention as set out in its Article 2.

In accordance with Article 4 paragraph 12 of the Agreement, NDCs communicated by Parties shall be recorded in a public registry, which is maintained by the secretariat and accessible [here](#).

## What are United Nations Climate Change Conferences?

United Nations climate change conferences have grown exponentially in size over the past two decades—from small working sessions into the largest annual conferences currently held under the auspices of the United Nations—and are now among the largest international meetings in the world. The intergovernmental negotiations have likewise become increasingly complex and involve an ever-increasing number of officials from governments all over the world, at all levels, as well as huge numbers of representatives from civil society and the global news media.

These conferences are the foremost global forums for multilateral discussion of climate change matters, and have an incredibly busy schedule. The conferences, which rotate annually among the five United Nations regional groups, serve as the formal meetings of the [Conference of the Parties](#) (COP), the [Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol](#) (CMP) and the [Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement](#) (the CMA).

They also include sessions of the subsidiary bodies (the [SBSTA](#) and the [SBI](#)) and any ad hoc negotiating groups. The UNFCCC secretariat supports all institutions involved in the negotiations, as well as the [Bureau of the COP/CMP/CMA](#), which is the executive body that advises the President of the conference.

### Meetings of the Conference of the Parties (COP/CMP/CMA):

The Conference of the Parties – meeting as COP, CMP and CMA – serves two main purposes:

1. To review the implementation of the Convention, the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement, respectively; and
2. To adopt decisions to further develop and implement these three instruments.

The latter can include establishment of any subsidiary bodies that are deemed necessary. Parties may also negotiate and adopt new legal instruments, like the Paris Agreement adopted by the COP in 2015 or the Doha Amendment to the Kyoto Protocol adopted by the CMP in 2012.

The conduct of the meetings follows certain rules (the so-called UNFCCC [draft rules of procedure](#) that are being applied by the COP, CMP, CMA and their subsidiary bodies). The brokering of agreed outcomes within the collective decision-making framework of the COP/CMP/CMA, however, is often a highly complex exercise which involves negotiation and compromise.

The conduct of the meetings and brokering of agreements within the collective decision-making framework of the COP therefore involves negotiation and compromise.