

Climate Change Negotiations in 2015 – The UN Framework

International negotiations are intensifying in 2015 as the world's national governments attempt to develop under a UN framework a successor approach to the Kyoto Protocol to address the threat of climate change and its projected dramatic impact on the civilizations of the planet earth. This paper provides a short primer on the ongoing preparations leading up to the meeting of national governments in Paris in December, 2015 designed to come up with an international consensus on how to limit greenhouse gas emissions into the earth's atmosphere.

THE UN FRAMEWORK

The Climate Change Negotiations are being conducted under a structure called the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The members of the UN are the countries that are considering what to do about the threat of climate change, and meet under something called the Conference of the Parties (COP), which are UN country members. The meeting in Lima, Peru December 1-12, 2014 (termed COP 20), was preliminary to a final meeting scheduled under the UNFCCC at the end of this year in Paris (COP 21) to determine if member countries in the world can agree on commitments to address the threats emanating from the earth's changing climate.

The UN system set up the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988 to provide policy makers on the UNFCCC with periodic assessments of the scientific basis of climate change, its impact and future risks, and options for adaptation and mitigation. The IPCC operates by assessing published literature throughout the world. It does not conduct its own scientific research.

The IPCC completed its 5th Assessment Report in November 2014. This report produced alarming assessments of the increase in the temperature in the atmosphere, the increased acidity of the oceans (estimated at 30%), the evidence of enhanced melting of the world's ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica, the rate of observed sea level rise, and unprecedented concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

The Kyoto Protocol, a product of the UNFCCC initiative, was established December 11, 1997 to take action in response to the growing concern about

climate change, a concern based in part on earlier IPCC Assessment Reports. The Kyoto Protocol entered into force on February 18, 2005 as an international treaty when sufficient countries ratified the treaty. President Clinton signed on during his administration, but the treaty was never submitted to the U.S. Senate for ratification, and therefore never became binding on the U.S. as a matter of both U.S. and international law.

Opposition in the U.S. to ratifying the Kyoto Protocol and any concerted action to combat the threat of climate change came from a few quarters; the fossil fuel industry concerned with the loss of market share and profits, if countries limited the use of their products as a result of legislation such as carbon taxes and encouraging alternative fuel sources; climate change deniers, some of whom called climate change a hoax; and specific criticism of the Kyoto Protocol which some claimed would impinge on national sovereignty to guide national policies, and in addition lacked a requirement that developing countries share in controlling greenhouse gas emissions.

China has since passed the U.S. as the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, and India is third, though the U.S. is, cumulatively, the largest contributor to these gases in the atmosphere.

There are two commitment periods under the Kyoto Protocol: the first started in 2008, and ended in 2012; and the second commitment period began on January 1, 2013 and will end in 2020.

At the very heart of the response to climate change continues to be the concern to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In 2010, governments agreed that greenhouse gas emissions must be reduced if global temperature increases would be limited to 2 degrees Celsius. The latest IPCC assessment Report raises the concern that without limiting the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, global temperature rises beyond 2 degrees Celsius will have severe economic and social consequences (temperature extremes, floods, droughts, forest fires, sea level rise) for future generations.

Greenhouse gases consist primarily of carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide. Carbon dioxide comprises the biggest component, and lasts in the atmosphere for about 1000 years. The carbon dioxide increase in the earth's atmosphere has occurred since the onset of the industrial revolution some 300 years ago. Carbon dioxide is produced from the burning of fossil fuels (petroleum, natural gas, and coal) to make electricity, operate factories,

support modern agriculture, and fuel transportation systems. The 5th Assessment Report states that the present concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, currently at 405 parts per million, are unprecedented in at least the last 800,000 years, and are broadly considered the driving force behind the rise in the earth's temperature.

The Kyoto Protocol is an international treaty, even though the U.S. is not a signatory to it. Because the Kyoto Protocol treaty obligations end in 2020, there is pressure from countries around the world to come up with a new international agreement in Paris that will bind countries after 2020 to limiting greenhouse gas emissions.

The meeting last December in Lima was the last major meeting of nations prior to the Paris meeting which will be held in December, 2015, and was structured to find a pathway to achieve a successful end product in Paris.

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