

Primer on the United Nations Climate Change Regime

Introduction

The planet's climate has always experienced variations; this is a naturally occurring phenomenon. However, scientific research suggests that since the industrial revolution, human-driven causes have accelerated temperature increases in the planet's atmosphere leading to unprecedented changes in the global climate system.

The United Nations Climate Change regime is at the forefront of global action to combat climate change, by addressing mitigation and adaptation challenges. Different institutions are providing the framework for international negotiations to shape climate policies, integrate expert advice and scientific evidence, undertake national assessments and establish priorities drawing from the research of thousands of scientists across the world.



The key institutions and their functions

The UN climate change institutional regime comprises four main bodies; these provide the policy frameworks and scientific basis to understand climate change, its impacts on social and ecological systems, and the potential response options to shift global economies and societies towards sustainable development and resilient pathways.

- United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)
- Conference of the Parties (COP)
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)
- World Meteorological Organization (WMO)

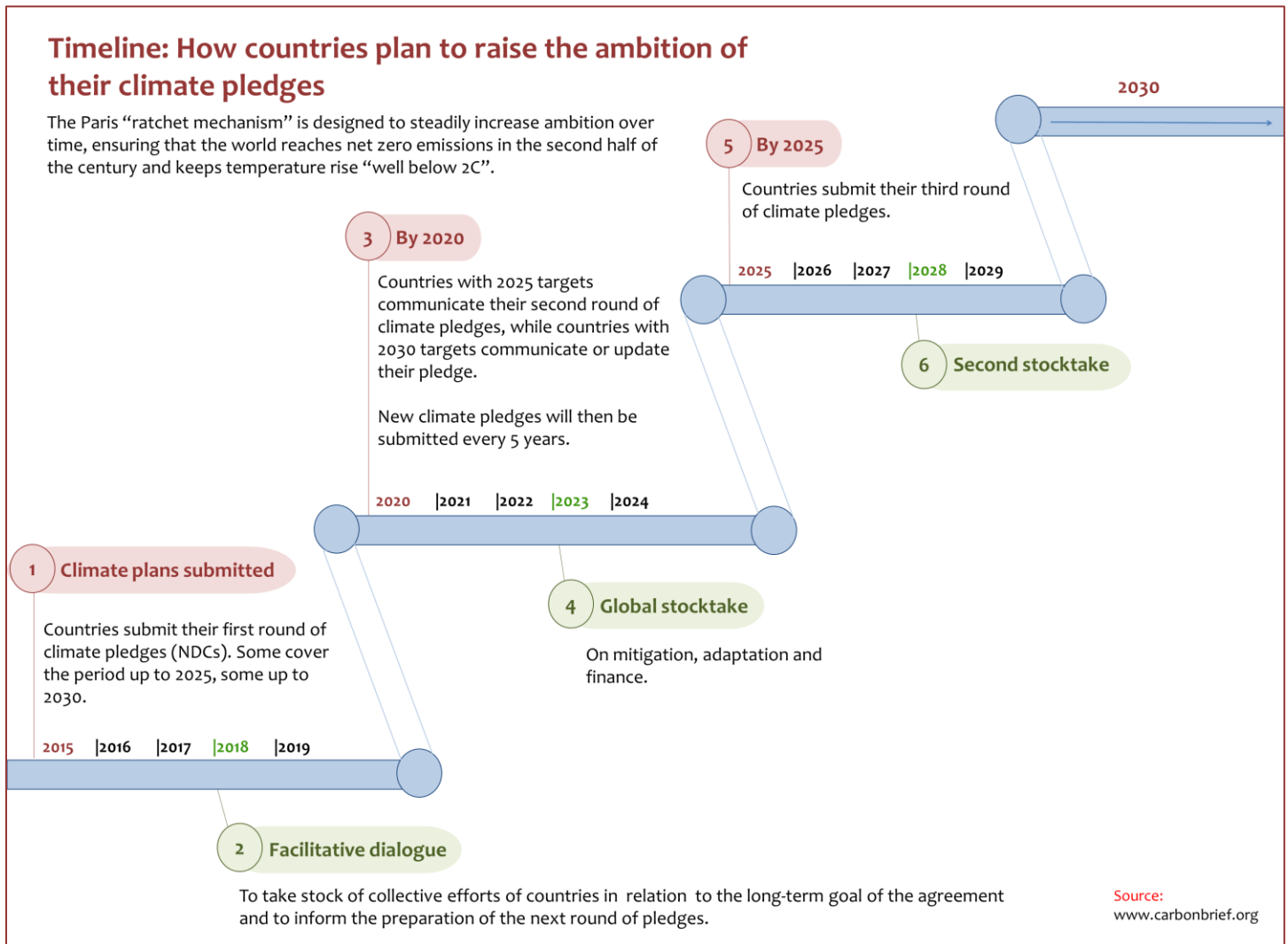
United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

In 1992 the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (referred to as the UNFCCC or the Convention)ⁱ was established, coming into force in 1994, to provide the foundation for multilateral action to combat climate change and its impacts on humanity and the planet's ecosystems. Currently it has near universal membership with 197 signatory countries (referred to as Parties). The objective of the convention is to “*stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.*” The need to take actions is based on three fundamental and well-established facts:

1. The concentration of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the earth's atmosphere is directly linked to the average global temperature of the planet.

2. The concentration of GHGs and mean global temperatures have risen steadily since the Industrial Revolution as a result of human activity.
3. As a consequence, action to reduce GHG emissions and enhance carbon sinks,¹ and to adapt to the impacts of climate change is imperative.

The Convention puts the onus on developed countries to lead climate action -- as they have historically been the source of most past and current GHG emissions -- and they are expected to do the most in implementing measures to mitigate climate change. The 2015 Paris Agreement marks the latest step in the evolution of the UN climate change regime and charts a new course in the global effort to combat climate change with defined milestones, with a timeline (known as the Paris “ratchet mechanism”) designed to steadily increase ambition over time towards achieving net zero emission by 2050.



The decisions and negotiations of the signatory Parties to the UNFCCC take place at the Conference of the Parties (COP).

¹ A carbon sink is a natural or artificial reservoir that absorbs and stores carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Examples of natural carbon sinks include oceans and certain types of forests and grasslands.



In 2017 the UNFCCC launched a Gender Action Plan and streamlined access to Gender and Climate Change Documentation through the UNFCCC website in order to support Parties of the Convention to mainstream gender considerations in the development and implementation of all national climate policies. This includes assessing differentiated needs of women and men and increasing women’s participation in decision-making.

Conference of the Parties (COP)

The Conference of the Parties (COP) is the supreme decision-making body of the UNFCCC. All countries that are Parties to the Convention are represented at the COP.

The COP is the mechanism through which the Parties establish procedural, institutional and administrative processes in order to negotiate their national level commitments to implement the measures within the Convention (UNFCCC). This annual exercise includes a stocktaking review of emission inventories submitted by the Parties in order to assess the progress made in achieving the ultimate objective of preventing “dangerous” human interference with the climate system of the planet.

The COP has two stages: a technical meeting usually held in May and a political ministerial meeting usually held in November.²

Each Party to the Convention is represented by a national delegation consisting of one or more officials empowered to represent and negotiate on behalf of their government. Each of these delegations also aligns and works with countries with similar interests and positions (referred to as Negotiating Blocks) before and during the conference.

- Latin America and Caribbean countries, as well as most developing countries, generally work through the *Group of 77 plus China* to establish common negotiating positions;
- *Small Island Developing States (SIDS)* is a coalition of some 40 low-lying islands, most of which are members of the G-77 that are particularly vulnerable to sea-level rise. SIDS countries are united by the threat that climate change poses to their survival and frequently adopt a common stance in negotiations;
- The *28 members of the European Union* meet in private to agree on common negotiating positions. As a regional economic integration organization, the European Union itself is also a Party to the Convention;
- *The Umbrella Group* is a loose coalition of non-EU developed countries usually made up of Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, the Russian Federation and the United States.

The Negotiating Blocks illustrate the diverging interests and needs of the different countries in addressing climate change, where issues such as the loss and damage agenda³ elicits contesting views on responsibility for climate change. In relation to this agenda, developing countries are calling for new mechanisms of compensation for losses associated with climate change. Carbon markets are another such issue, where countries are seeking to establish common mechanisms for quantifying and reporting progress towards emission reduction targets and rules to ensure transparency of related mitigation actions.

This year’s COP24 in Katowice, Poland will be critical, as the Parties expect to agree on the Paris Rulebook, which will guide the implementation of the Paris Agreement commitments and tracking of corresponding financial support.ⁱⁱ

² An exception will be COP24, scheduled to take place the first two weeks of December 2018.

³ Article 8 of the Paris Agreement provides a legal basis for long-term action on loss and damage and involves the development of approaches to address harm caused by slow-onset climate change events – such as floods, hurricanes and sea-level rise – that cannot be avoided by mitigation and adaptation measures.



Through the COP mechanism, the Parties have established an item in the negotiations agenda to recognize the importance of equally involving women and men in the UNFCCC processes, and to promote the development and implementation of gender-responsive national climate policies.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)ⁱⁱⁱ is the leading international body for the scientific assessment of climate change. The IPCC is funded by regular contributions from its parent organizations the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), and voluntary contributions from its member countries and the UNFCCC.

The IPCC reviews worldwide research and issues regular assessment reports on the state of scientific, technical and socio-economic knowledge on climate change, including its causes, potential impacts and response strategies. Since 1988, the IPCC has prepared five assessment reports; the sixth one will be published in 2022 in time for the first UNFCCC global stocktakes under the Paris Agreement in 2023. The IPCC also compiles individual reports and technical papers. The findings of the IPCC are apolitical and reflect global scientific consensus, drawing upon the work and observations of thousands of scientist worldwide.

The work of the IPCC informs the UNFCCC. IPCC assessments provide a scientific basis for governments at all levels to develop climate-related policies and inform negotiations at the COP. The assessments are policy-relevant but not policy-prescriptive: they present climate change projections based on different scenarios, the risks that climate change poses and implications of different response options.^{iv}

There are three main working groups in the IPCC:

- Working Group I: The Physical Science Basis
- Working Group II: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability
- Working Group III: Mitigation of Climate Change



In March 2018 the IPCC has established the [IPCC Gender Task Group](#) with the mandate to develop a framework of goals and actions to improve gender balance and address gender-related issues within the IPCC.

World Meteorological Association (WMO)

The WMO is an organization of the United Nations system, dedicated to international cooperation and coordination on the state and behaviour of the Earth's atmosphere, its interaction with the land and oceans, the weather and climate it produces, and the resulting distribution of water resources.

Since 2016, the WMO has issued a statement on the state of the global climate at the COP. The report is an authoritative reference based on multiple international datasets maintained independently by global climate analysis centres and information submitted by WMO Members' National Meteorological and Hydrological Services and Research Institutes. In the last statement, the WMO highlighted that "*the rate of increase of atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂) over the past 70 years is nearly 100 times larger than that at the end of the last ice age.*"

The WMO's core areas of work include promoting the application of climate information in all human activities, assisting capacity development in National Meteorological and Hydrological Services, and analyzing data collected from thousands of land and sea observation instruments and Earth-observing satellites. The WMO also coordinates international research programs to improve environmental observations and scientific assessments of regional and global environmental conditions.



In June 2015 the WMO adopted a Policy on Gender Equality and in June 2016 adopted the WMO Gender Action Plan. WMO's objective is to “fully realize the professional and human potential of both women and men through equal employment opportunities and to provide improved environmental services that are responsive and sensitive to women's and men's needs and will make a difference to their lives.” Regular progress reporting on the implementation of the WMO Gender Policy can be found on the organization's website.

Potential Parliamentary Actions

National parliaments are also key stakeholders in the climate change agenda. Their members can accelerate the adaptation and mitigation of their country to climate change through their:

- Law-making and scrutiny functions: parliamentarians can draft or reform legislation that provide incentives for investment in clean energy or strengthens national disaster risk reduction systems;
- Budget-review and approval functions: parliamentarians can help ensure that national budgets invest in resilient and sustainable infrastructure and social protection programs for addressing climate impacts, and advocate for sex-disaggregated data on the projected impacts of these investments;
- Oversight functions: parliaments can monitor commitments made by their governments in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)⁴ to the COP;
- Representation functions: parliamentarians can apply different mechanisms to engage citizens and civil society organizations, including from traditionally marginalized communities, in decision-making at all stages of the legislative process to ensure that national efforts to combat climate change are coherent with the priorities and needs of the communities that they represent.⁵

At an individual level, there are many other ways in which parliamentarians can contribute to these efforts by, for example:

1. Requesting a briefing or status report on progress made to implement their country's NDCs. A national climate change focal point in each country can provide an update on negotiations under the UN climate regime. This is important for understanding current contentious issues in negotiations and possible consequences of different outcomes;
2. Supporting increased allocation of resources to national science council budgets to generate indicators and a national evidence base, including gender disaggregated data. This information is important for effective monitoring of national policies, programs and investments to achieve NDCs, and can strengthen the negotiating position of countries within the UN Climate Regime;
3. Promoting international cooperation, partnerships and information sharing on climate change, to facilitate the flow of resources to the country from regional and international funding mechanisms, to build sectoral capacities and technical skills in key sectors, and to present coherent and consistent negotiating positions at the annual COP;

⁴ Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) refers to the commitments of each signatory country (or Party) under the Paris Agreement to reduce carbon emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

⁵ In 2018, ParlAmericas launched a Toolkit on Citizen Participation in the Legislative Process, which was co-created by civil society and parliaments and highlights existing effective practices applied in countries across the LAC region. It can be consulted at: http://parlAmericas.org/uploads/documents/Toolkit_Citizen%20Participation%20in%20the%20Legislative%20Process.pdf

4. Promoting investments in weather monitoring infrastructure and climate research programs, which are critical to generating future scenarios and providing accurate data for modelling of climate risks and of changing climate patterns at national and sub-national levels;
5. Strengthening public access to information about parliamentary efforts to combat climate change, including decision-making processes to develop national and regional strategies on climate action;
6. Promoting national consultations to identify and validate the risks, needs and priorities of different groups of constituents and local communities in relation to climate change;
7. Monitoring government commitments and progress on the NDCs and assuring that national commitments are consistent with the capabilities and needs of their country.

Conclusion

The UN climate change regime is a unique system of institutions working on a global scale to tackle climate change. The reports and policy frameworks of these institutions provide a guide for corresponding actions by governments. Some of the processes of the UN climate change regime related to the implementation of international climate change agreements are still being negotiated through annual meetings of their signatory governments.

National parliaments have an important role in undertaking legislative reforms and mobilizing political will to implement the commitments of their governments under the international climate change regime. They can also inform the international negotiation process by voicing the priorities and needs of the communities they represent – including from a perspective that differentiates the needs and experiences of women and men in relation to climate change.

References

ⁱ [UNFCCC \(2002\) A guide to the Climate Change Convention Process](#)

ⁱⁱ <https://www.carbonbrief.org/bonn-climate-talks-key-outcomes-from-the-may-2018-un-climate-conference>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/press/ipcc_leaflets_2010/ipcc-brochure_understanding.pdf

^{iv} http://www.ipcc.ch/news_and_events/docs/factsheets/FS_what_ipcc.pdf

ParlAmericas Climate Change Program

ParlAmericas supports parliamentary action on climate change through innovative programming, designed for parliamentarians of the Americas and the Caribbean. This includes working sessions and field-based dialogues convening parliamentarians with local and international experts, and key stakeholders to advance the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), the Sustainable Development Agenda and the adoption of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction in Latin America and the Caribbean. Through its Climate Change Program, ParlAmericas also produces knowledge resources that are informed by evidence-based research and tailored to the law-making, oversight, and representation functions of parliamentarians.

ParlAmericas serves as the international secretariat for the Parliamentary Network on Climate Change (PNCC). This is a joint initiative with Parlatino that was formally integrated into the ParlAmericas structure in December 2016. The PNCC is a hemispheric forum to advance legislative work and promote parliamentary diplomacy on climate change, and exchange knowledge on mitigation and adaptation.

ParlAmericas is the inter-parliamentary institution that promotes parliamentary diplomacy in the inter-American system. Convening the national legislatures from North, Central and South America and the Caribbean, ParlAmericas works to strengthen democratic governance in the hemisphere by enhancing the ability of legislators to fulfill their roles and responsibilities through exchanges of parliamentary best practices and by promoting cooperative political dialogue on regional issues.

For more information, visit www.parlamericas.org or contact ParlAmericas' Climate Change Program: parlamericascc@parlamericas.org

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