



Fact sheet: An introduction to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its Kyoto Protocol

Climate change science and effects

The effects of global climate change are becoming ever more evident. Scientists believe that climate change is already causing more frequent occurrences of drought, flooding and rises in malaria. Other phenomena attributed to climate change are increased incidents of hurricanes and forest fires. Among the long-term impacts are rising sea levels and damage to crops which can lead to wide-spread famine. Some of the most serious effects of climate change are occurring in countries least prepared to counter them. Many African countries are among the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

Global warming is caused by an excess of heat-trapping gases, first and foremost carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxides. These gases mainly result from the burning of fossil fuels, from agriculture and from waste dumps. The gases prevent the sun's energy from radiating back into space after it has reached the surface of the earth, much like the glass of a greenhouse.

The Convention and the Protocol

In 1992, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was adopted as the basis for a global response to the problem. With 194 Parties, the Convention enjoys near-universal membership. The ultimate objective of the Convention is to stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that will prevent dangerous human interference with the climate system.

The Convention is complemented by the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which has 192 Parties. Under this treaty, 37 industrialised countries and the European Community have committed to reducing their emissions by an average of 5 percent by 2012 against 1990 levels. Industrialized countries must first and foremost take domestic action against climate change. But the Protocol also allows them to meet their emission reduction commitments abroad through so-called "market-based mechanisms".

For example, one of the Protocol's market-based mechanisms, the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), permits industrialized countries to earn emission credits through investment in sustainable development projects that reduce emissions in developing countries.

The UNFCCC and its Kyoto Protocol are also designed to assist countries in adapting to the inevitable effects of climate change. They facilitate the development of techniques that can help increase resilience to climate change impacts – for example, the development of salt-resistant crops – and to exchange best practices with regard to adaptation.



United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

For more information, you may also wish to refer to the Fact sheets on The Kyoto Protocol, and the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP/CMP).