



GENERAL ASSEMBLY TOPIC GUIDE

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Protection of global climate for present and future generations of humankind (18d)

Since the 1800s, human activity has been the primary driver of global climate change. Due to the release of greenhouse gasses (GHGs), primarily from the burning of fossil fuels for energy, transportation, and industry, the average temperature of the Earth's surface is now about 1.1°C warmer than prior to the Industrial Revolution and warmer than at any other time in the last 100,000 years.¹ This temperature increase has a wide array of adverse impacts, including an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, sea level rise, diminished agricultural returns and associated food insecurity, and decreased biodiversity. In turn, these impacts can lead to political instability, public health crises, and conflict.²

Through the 1970s and 1980s, issues related to the environment, including air pollution and water resources, came into focus for United Nations agencies, and in 1988, the issue of climate change was on the agenda of the General Assembly for the first time. In that same year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established with the mission of providing scientific information and assessment related to climate change to UN member states for the purposes of informing policy.³

In 1994, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) entered into force with the goal of combatting “dangerous human interference with the climate system”, and with this, established the primary formal forum for cooperation on climate change. The UNFCCC's decision-making body, the Conference of the Parties (COP) meets annually to assess progress and negotiate agreement on key issues.

At COP3 in 1997, the first major climate change agreement was struck with the Kyoto Protocol, which established a scientific consensus on the causes of climate change and outlined targets for reducing GHG emissions. Under the principle of “common but differentiated responsibility and respective capabilities (CMDR-RC)” in the Kyoto Protocol, more developed nations were bound to greater emission reductions in recognition that these nations were more responsible for past emissions and had relatively more resources to take action to combat climate change.⁴ In part, this led to the United States, which would have been compelled to reduce emissions, to stand as the lone major country to not ratify the agreement. Additionally, countries like China and India, which were classified as developing countries under the agreement, were not compelled to take significant action under the Kyoto Protocol, despite being increasingly major emitters at the time of the agreement.⁵ While studies have shown that developed nations bound by the Kyoto Protocol had 7%

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/what-is-climate-change>

² <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/climate-change>

³ <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/stockholm-kyoto-brief-history-climate-change>

⁴ https://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol

⁵ <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/markings-kyoto-protocol%E2%80%99s-25th-anniversary>

lower emissions than if the agreement had not been in place, global emissions still rose significantly during the period of the Kyoto Protocol.⁶

The next major global climate treaty was adopted in 2015 at COP21 in Paris. The Paris Agreement, as it came to be called, superseded the Kyoto Protocol and was ratified by all UNFCCC member states with the exception of Iran, Libya, and Yemen. The United States withdrew from the agreement in 2020 before the Biden Administration rejoined in 2021. The overarching goal of the Paris Agreement is to hold “the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels,” with an additional goal “to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.” The agreement also aims for carbon neutrality by the second half of the current century, meaning the amount of GHG emissions equal the amount removed from the atmosphere. Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Agreement requires all countries to set emissions reduction targets, known as nationally determined contributions (NDCs), not just developed countries.⁷

While the Paris Agreement marked a major step in global climate cooperation, the IPCC notes that meeting the agreement’s more ambitious goal of limiting global temperature increases to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels is critical to avoid the most severe impacts of climate change. Additionally, to meet this lower target, GHG emissions must peak by 2025 and decline 43% by 2030.⁸ As of late 2023, the policies of countries under the Paris Agreement will increase global temperatures by 2.7°C, falling well short of agreement targets.⁹

The latest round of global climate talks concluded in December 2023 at COP28 in Dubai, UAE. In a major step for climate negotiations, the parties of COP28 agreed to “transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade, so as to achieve net zero by 2050.” This marked the first time that a transition from fossil fuels to clean energy has been included in a global climate agreement, which includes oil- and gas-producing countries.¹⁰ However, the consensus agreement was a compromise, as it did not mandate the phase out of fossil fuels, but rather “called on” working towards this goal.¹¹ In the lead up to COP28, more than 80 countries, including the European Union, small island states, the United States, Canada, and others, pushed for a full fossil fuel phaseout. Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia were among those countries opposed to such a mandate.¹²

In light of the developments at COP28, several matters remain unresolved. Generally speaking, climate agreements mean little if the policies to enact those agreements are not set at the national level and carried out to fruition. While the overarching message is that all countries must be part of the transition from fossil fuels to clean energy, this transition is extremely costly, and many developing countries will face financial challenges in achieving this goal without significant support. Additionally, COP28 did not make meaningful progress on the status of carbon markets, systems in

⁶ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0095069618300391>

⁷ <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/paris-global-climate-change-agreements>

⁸ <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>

⁹ <https://climateactiontracker.org/global/cat-thermometer/>

¹⁰ <https://www.wri.org/insights/cop28-outcomes-next-steps>

¹¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonmcgowan/2023/12/15/cop28-uae-consensus-agreement-lacks-promised-action/?sh=52b6e3a9257f>

¹² <https://www.reuters.com/world/world-divided-cop28-over-whether-end-fossil-fuel-era-2023-12-06/>

which emitters compensate for their emissions by purchasing credits from entities that remove or reduce GHG emissions. Sustainable agreements and actions to move towards clean transport systems, support effective carbon capture technology, limit emissions from agriculture, and eliminate loopholes in climate-related policies also remain challenges for the global community to achieve comprehensive climate solutions.¹³

¹³ <https://www.wri.org/insights/cop28-outcomes-next-steps>

