

Climate protection between hope and despair

20 years of the UNFCCC

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The **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)** was one of the key outcomes of the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. The aim of the Convention is to stabilise the concentration of heat-trapping greenhouse gases at a level that prevents dangerous interference with the climate system. Developed countries were to take the lead, by returning emissions to 1990 levels by 2000, and by providing technology, finance and capacity building for developing countries.

Five years later, in 1997, the Convention was strengthened with a **Kyoto Protocol**, where developed countries took legally binding obligations to cut their emissions by 5.2% below 1990 levels by 2008-2012 in aggregate, as the first step towards much larger emission cuts in the future. Developing countries, whose emissions per capita were just a fraction of those in the rich countries, did not get binding emission reduction obligations.

20 years later

Twenty years later, we are **nowhere near achieving the aim of the Convention** and the issues that are being negotiated at the UNFCCC will not play an important role at the Rio+20 summit (though many informal discussions will take place in the corridors).

Carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions have grown by about 40% and atmospheric CO₂ concentrations have not been this high in millions of years. Global mean temperature has increased by a whopping 0.4°C and oceans have become 0.28°C warmer. As CO₂ dissolves in seawater, oceans are becoming more acidic at a speed and to a degree not witnessed in at least 60 to 300 million years, threatening marine life. Alarming impacts are starting to show, including the rapid melting of the Arctic sea ice, two record droughts in the Amazon within 6 years, and apocalyptic forest fires in Russia.

What is worse is that global emissions still continue to grow and the speed accelerated in the crucial decade 2000-2010. Governments have agreed to keep warming below 2°C compared to pre-industrial levels, which would require global emissions to peak within the next few years and start declining very fast after that to be close to zero by mid-century. However, countries' current emission reduction pledges for 2020 would at best only get us half way, which means that we are on a path for about 2.5 to 5°C warming by the end of the century. This kind of warming would drastically change the world as we know it. The last time the Earth was about 2 to 3°C warmer – about 3 million years ago – sea levels were between 25 and 35 metres higher than today.

Was the UNFCCC the wrong approach?

Governments have **so far** failed to prevent dangerous climate change, no question about it. But had it not been for the UNFCCC, the situation would be even worse.

The entry into force of the Kyoto Protocol was a major achievement in international diplomacy, when the world's largest emitter at the time – the United States – refused to ratify it. For eight long years the US did virtually nothing to contribute to the UN process. In fact, when the Kyoto Protocol entered into force in 2005, President Bush tried to undermine it by

establishing competing processes based on voluntarism¹. The complete lack of commitment by the US and its ally Canada (and before 2007, also Australia) has hindered progress. One can't say that the UN has failed, when its efforts were killed by countries that promised to lead, but criminally failed to act.

- **The UNFCCC did succeed in elevating climate change to the highest political level.** The UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen 2009 was a failure, as it needed to conclude new legally binding agreement(s). The good news, though, was that the intense negotiations elevated the topic to the highest political agenda, and activated civil society, regional governments and the private sector around the world. The political energy generated by the talks helped to ensure cross-party support for the UK's ground-breaking climate legislation, and contributed to DONG, Denmark's nationally owned utility, abandoning coal investments.
- **The seeds of success have been planted, but will they be nurtured?** Since Copenhagen the UN climate process has been in intensive care. Countries' 2020 emission reduction pledges are too low, and they are not even binding. While a new architecture is being set up for funding, adaptation, forest protection and technology cooperation, the money to run them is largely missing. That said, the seeds of a potential success have been planted. Countries have acknowledged the need to improve pre-2020 emission cuts, and developed countries still stand by their commitment to mobilise \$100bn US dollars a year by 2020 on climate finance for developing countries. Governments have agreed to a new deadline (2015) by when an agreement covering all countries should be sealed for the post-2020 period. Elements for a decent climate agreement exist, and the next couple of years will show if countries want to make it happen.

Let's speed up the clean energy revolution!

The good news is that the solutions for preventing climate chaos exist – much more so than 20 years ago. Global emissions can be turned into decline in this crucial decade.

- **The renewable energy revolution is already happening.** Through coupling current renewable energy growth with ambitious energy efficiency measures and carbon pricing the world can achieve an 80% renewable energy share by 2050 and deliver more than 80% CO₂ cuts. It's a win-win solution that cuts emissions and protects against increasing oil and gas prices.
- **Achieving zero deforestation is possible.** In 2011 deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon reached a record low, proving that increasing living standards while cutting deforestation is completely possible. Brazil can achieve zero deforestation by 2015 and lead the way in ending deforestation globally – if it chooses forest protection over short-term profits and destruction.
- **Breakthroughs need to happen at national level.** It is the level of national progress around the world that will decide if there is a chance of success for the international talks. All major emitters, and in particular industrialised countries, need to up their emission pledges and commit to much faster emission cuts.
- **Delivering on climate finance** needs to be prioritised. A lot of analytical work exists on different source options, including on innovative finance mechanisms such as a Financial Transaction Tax. It's time to decide and deliver the money to act.
- **The ping-pong game has to stop.** There are irresponsible laggards, such as the US or Canada, who are standing in the way of progress. But inaction by some is no excuse for others to stall. The energy revolution and zero deforestation come with major social and economic benefits – regardless of what others did or did not do.

Join the Energy [r]evolution!
<http://www.energyblueprint.info>

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¹ The Asia Pacific Partnership, starting in 2005, and the Major Emitters Meetings, starting in 2007.