

The international climate change policy process – a brief history and the current state of play

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The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), one of the three Conventions adopted at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, has the ultimate aim to “...stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system”. Given that there was a lot less scientific evidence at the time of its adoption, countries aspired to fulfil this goal in the face of scientific uncertainty. Several important milestones have been achieved since the Convention was ratified, including the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol, and many important but less well-known decisions have been made to strive for greater ambition and action on all levels. But the international response has not kept pace with the mounting scientific evidence over the past two decades. Although many countries have taken steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, a gap remains between what science indicates is necessary to avoid catastrophic climate change, and countries’ actions. Present-day emissions are higher than they have ever been, and global temperatures are on the rise: 2014 was the 38th consecutive year with a global temperature above the 20th century average, and the hottest year ever measured. Given this disparity, as well as the increasing scientific evidence on what is at stake, mounting pressure from citizens, religious leaders, an increasing engagement of private sector leaders and businesses, governments have set themselves a deadline to agree a global treaty to address climate change, that includes and specifies actions from all nations. The 21st Meeting of the Parties to the UNFCCC (COP 21) will take place in Paris, in December of this year. In addition to a legal treaty, countries will also make crucial decision on current climate change actions from now and until 2020, a financial package to support developing countries’ action to reduce emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change, and the so-called Intended National Determined Contributions (INDCs), which are actions that countries intend to take under a global agreement from 2020.