

Fourth Committee (Special, Political, and Decolonization): Climate Change



JPHMUN 2011 Background Guide



1. Introduction

Climate change has surfaced to become one of the most pertinent issues discussed around the world in recent years. The enhanced destructive potential for natural disasters and the increased rate of their occurrence has set off alarms across continents. More than two billion people have been affected by ‘natural’ disasters in the last ten years and the catastrophes range from acute floods to deadly heat waves.¹ Despite the cyclical phases of global warming and cooling, there is a general consensus among scientists and other experts within the field, that there is a real problem we face today as a result of climate change.

In the last few decades it has become clear that human actions have critically increased the production of greenhouse gases. Notably, the hazards of climate change are due to a number of practices that are intimately linked to industrial economies, such as the burning of fossil fuels, the release of ozone-destroying and toxic chemicals, and the emission of sulfur and nitrogen oxides. The accelerating levels of these gases including carbon dioxide in the atmosphere have contributed much to the rising levels of global temperatures.² Many in the field of science and academia are united in their agreement that something should be done to stop and reverse the trend that causes climate change. The consequences of not doing so are speculated to be “a devastating cascade of natural disasters that will change life on earth, as we know it.”³ At the grassroots level, the green movement is gaining momentum through raising public awareness and concern. Movies including Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* have been significant in raising the alarm regarding climate change.

The systems at risk mainly include water resources, agriculture, forestry, fisheries, human settlements, energy and industries.⁴ Some of the adverse effects of prospective climate change are expected to be: reduced crop yields in most tropical and sub tropical regions, decreased water availability in water-scarce regions, increase in heat stress mortality, increased energy demand for “summer cooling,” increased number of floods, landslides, avalanches, quantity of soil erosion and mudslide damages.⁵

2. Different Views on Responses to Climate Change

Since the 1980s, environment problems have come to the forefront of the agendas of many governments. States are generally split between their views on how to address the issue of climate change. A response of *Adaptation* would involve allowing climate change to continue while focusing on the adjustments required to survive the changes. Some examples of adapting

to climate change involve producing new strains of crops that withstand high temperatures or building coastal defenses against flooding.⁶ A response of *Offsetting* would involve taking actions that would bring about the opposite effects of climate change. Some scientists propose a mechanism of reflecting solar radiation back into space;⁷ however, proposals such as these are often not substantial enough to be acted upon. The third category of response of climate change is *Mitigation*. Mitigation is the method that involves trying to reduce the known causes to climate change.⁸ This would involve reducing the rate at which green house gases are emitted or enhancing the natural cycles that impact the climate in a desirable way.⁹ An example of this would include planting more trees to absorb greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide.

3. The United Nations and Climate Change

The United Nations is one of the most active international organizations that place substantial resources into analyzing the issue of climate change. It aspires to develop common grounds for cooperation among nations and holds various opportunities for heads of state to convene and devise solutions to pertinent problems like global warming. The United Nations regards the environment as a common property where all nations have a shared responsibility in protecting and securing it.¹⁰

One of the first and most important UN reports to raise awareness about climate change was the Brundtland Commission's report, *Our Common Future*. Published in 1987, the report called for a change in politics so that sustainable development could be achieved. Following *Our Common Future*, the UN held its first summit devoted to the issue of climate change in 1992. The *Earth Summit* as a result, produced the United Nations' preliminary framework on the Convention on Climate Change.¹¹ The Convention, which entered into force on March 21, 1994, has a near universal membership.¹² 191 UN member states at present have ratified to follow through gathering and sharing information which best reflects national policies regarding climate change.¹³ Member states also share strategies that address greenhouse gas emissions and how best to adapt to the impacts brought about by climate change. The United Nations Framework on Climate Change (UNFCCC) also endeavors to provide financial and technological support to developing countries to help cope with the necessary remodeling associated with climate change.¹⁴

The Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change

In 1998, the World Metrological Association together with the UN Environment Programme established the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC).¹⁵ The IPCC soon became a significant source of scientific information. Today, it continues to provide comprehensive and thoroughly documented assessment reports on the current state of climate change and the trend that future projections are likely to take under different scenarios.¹⁶

The IPCC itself does not make recommendations as to what should be done about climate change but it does evaluate future projections of climate change and analyses the changes it would cause humans, other life forms and the environment in general.¹⁷ The IPCC also strives to react to the findings outlined by its studies conducted on climate change. Most of the reports published by the IPCC support the view that human activities are the leading cause for changes in the climate, thus most of the solutions presented by the panel, advocate curtailing human actions that contribute to deforestation, desertification and other environmental degradation. The panel works on developing measures that adapt to the projected changes, sets out mitigation options and scrutinizes the trade offs and relationships climate change policies would have with

other policy objectives.¹⁸ It also plays an important role in reviewing strategies needed for various stabilization levels in the long term.

The Kyoto Protocol

The Kyoto Protocol formulated in 1997 under the wing of the *UN Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC) sets emission targets for industrialized countries so that they would eventually reduce greenhouse gases discharged into the atmosphere.¹⁹ What sets the Kyoto Protocol apart from the UNFCCC is that the Protocol commits nations to follow through their commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions rather than merely encouraging states to do so. The Kyoto Protocol has set binding targets for thirty-seven industrialized countries thus far though countries may not be close to achieving them.²⁰

The Protocol is based on the acknowledgement that developed countries are primarily responsible for the current levels of greenhouse gases present in the atmosphere.²¹ As a result, the Kyoto protocol places more burdens on the developed countries. Nations who abide by the Kyoto Protocol are expected to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions essentially through national measures.²² The Protocol led to the introduction of various mechanisms that enhances sustainable development. The system of emissions trading, the clean development mechanism and the joint implementation are some of the tools developed by the protocol to help countries target climate change.

The Copenhagen Accord

The Copenhagen Accord is the most recent UN-led Climate Change Conference that brought together the powerful and expansionary economies of the United States, China, Brazil, India and South Africa, among others. It was agreed during this summit of December 2009 that global temperature rise should be limited to less than two-degree Celsius per year.²³ The accord promised to deliver \$30 billion over the next three years to help developing countries pursue a sustainable economic growth as they focus on the imminent issues of poverty eradication, better health care and quality of education.²⁴ It was further outlined in the Conference that an amount of \$100 billion would be provided to developing nations by 2020 to cope with Climate change.²⁵

However, the Copenhagen accord did not set a target on carbon cuts nor did it deliver any agreements on legally binding treaties.²⁶ Critiques of the Copenhagen Accord also point out that no firm targets have been underscored for limiting the global temperature raise. In order for the deals to be accepted as an official UN agreement it must be endorsed by all 192 member states.²⁷ This lends further political problems as the issues of sovereignty and national interests surface. Small island nations, densely populated, low lying and least developed countries generally call for more strident measures to limit emissions while countries concerned with fast economic growth are less enthusiastic about drastic measures to combat climate change.

Cancun Climate Change Talks

The 16th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Cancun, Mexico concluded in December, 2010. The deal produced, dubbed the Cancun Agreements, has been hailed by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as being an important success. The different agreements formalize mitigation pledges and ensure increased accountability, as well as progress towards legally binding measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Because the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol is set to finish in 2012, the Cancun Agreements are also supposed to fill the gap between then and the second commitment period established in the Kyoto Protocol. They also include concrete action to protect the world's forests.²⁸

At Cancun, member states recognized the challenges that developing countries face in reducing their greenhouse gas emissions. Thus, the Agreements provide for establishing a fund for long-term climate financing to help support developing countries and to bolster technological cooperation.²⁹ The Green Climate Fund will start out by using the World Bank as a trustee, which the US, Japan, and the European Union have pressed for as it gives them more oversight over the money spent. Developed countries feel that this is important given that they are providing the funds.³⁰

The Agreement was endorsed by Japan, China, and even the US. It has been argued that one of the reasons that these countries supported the deal is that it does not achieve a comprehensive and all-encompassing deal that is needed for effective reductions. However, Bolivia rejected the deal as it stated that the reduction of emissions of 13-16 percent was not enough; the reductions would still allow a four degrees Celsius increase in temperature stated Bolivian delegation chief Pablo Solon. He added further that Bolivia could not agree a deal that would continue what his country's president has termed "ecocide."³¹

For 2011, the 17th UNFCCC conference is set to take place in South Africa. Environmental activists and NGOs will continue to press for a legally binding agreement there.³²

4. Different Approaches Taken by States

The deep divisions that underlay the issue of what is to be done regarding the climate change issue can be summarized by the different stands taken by key international players in the Copenhagen Summit.

Rapidly developing countries like China have agreed to reduce their emissions through energy intensity and have set imperative goals for 2020.³³ China has also embarked on a national climate change plan where industrial emissions are to be reduced to half the emission levels in 2005.³⁴ It is predicted through various UN studies conducted that China will reduce a quarter of the total emissions required globally. The Chinese Republic further advocates the view that the West should provide low carbon technology for developing countries to cut back on their greenhouse gas emissions.³⁵

India similarly has agreed to limit the growth of greenhouse gas emissions but refuses to commit to binding targets.³⁶ The nation further points a blaming finger on wealthy countries and the evident gap between per capita emissions between countries. However, India remains keen on preserving legal obligations such as the Kyoto for developing countries.

Other countries like Canada have laid out plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20% on the 2006 levels to receive strong criticisms that the targets were inadequate.³⁷

The United States on the other hand has been slow to acknowledge climate change as a pressing issue. The United States under the administration of President Clinton came close to endorsing the Kyoto Protocol but failed to do so in the end. President Clinton's successor President George W. Bush rejected the Kyoto protocol altogether and placed greater value on the ideals of state sovereignty.³⁸ A nation that places significant emphasis on state sovereignty often opposes treaties that impose international legal obligations.

State sovereignty is the idea that the final authority within a political community lays within the state and that the state is not accountable to anyone but itself.³⁹

There has however, been some recent cause for optimism regarding the role of United States in confronting the issue of climate change. President Barack Obama announced a US emissions reduction target and was a participant in the Copenhagen Summit. Nonetheless, divisions in political interests do exist and the United States further insists that economically expanding

countries like China, India and South Africa must commit to slow growth to reduce the level of greenhouse gas emissions.⁴⁰

To offer yet another perspective, some countries like Mexico commend a cap and trade system and a 50% reduction in emissions by 2050 from the 2002 levels.⁴¹ A cap and trade system is one of many environmental policies that have emerged in search of cleaner and more sustainable forms of development. Under a cap and trade system, it becomes mandatory to place a limit on the level of emissions while allowing states the flexibility to buy and sell their allocated quota of emissions.⁴² The cap and trade system has had few but successful programs that reward innovation and efficiency while holding nations accountable for their impact on the environment.

The United Nations pursues the cap and trade strategy in the current times as opposed to other methods like carbon taxing because of the relative simplicity and practicality of the system.⁴³ There is no existing global taxation system that all nations can follow, but countries can come together and make arrangements for a cap and trade system under the umbrella of an encompassing organization such as the UN.

The European Union is an example where the system of a cap and trade policy has worked and the Union has voiced its opinion that wealthy countries must make an 80-85% cut in their emissions by 2050 and that poorer countries should slow down their rate of growth.⁴⁴ The EU has proposed an amount of \$7-22 billion to help developing countries face the cost of adapting to more sustainable growth.⁴⁵ The European Union further proposed an amount of \$150 billion per year to be allocated to developing countries by 2020.⁴⁶

5. Barriers to Combatting Climate Change

There are a number of barriers that limit the effective tackling of climate change. Perhaps the most important one was mentioned above: state sovereignty. Because climate change is a global problem, it requires coordinated international action. However, countries are reluctant to relinquish their sovereignty and become regulated by international protocols or regulations. States often advocate finding local solutions, for instance Canada argues that it is building a made-in Canada solution. However, doing so will result in inconsistent practices that will allow unreasonable levels of greenhouse gas emissions to persist. This is one political barrier, and another is that as countries compete against each other for political power and influence, they want to make sure that they do not adopt policies that will result in them losing power.

This feeds into economic power. At this point, using fossil fuels is essential in industrial economies, and thus, as states compete to attract business and investment, their governments do not want to create environmental regulations that are too tough and will cause businesses to relocate in search of more profitable jurisdictions. Going green is expensive, so it is more profitable for companies to remain in the black economy, or using fossil fuels. This creates a process which is known as “the race to the bottom” because countries compete to offer business friendly environments, and hence to have fewer regulations. Encouraging more corporate environmental policy is also expensive for governments as the latter are often expected to offer subsidies for going green. The question for governments is how to find the money for such subsidies. This is particularly the case for developing countries which already have soaring levels of debt.

The expenses of becoming a green company is a market barrier to combating climate change. It is just not cost-effective for corporations or power-producing plants to switch over to renewable energy sources. For smaller firms that are in competition with larger corporations, this

problem is magnified as it makes it harder for them to enter the market and survive if their production process is more expensive than the large corporation that has not transitioned to the green economy. Part of what makes it expensive to make that transition are *technical constraints*. For instance, there might not be sufficiently developed infrastructure to facilitate changing fully or almost fully to renewable resources. This is the case with the new Honda hydrogen-powered car because gas stations that sell hydrogen only exist in a few places at this point.

6. Conclusion

Given the nature of the climate change problem and the complexity of international negotiation, the difficulty to achieve coherence in environmental protection at a global scale is not surprising. Sovereign states need to come to agreements on the topics of development policies, trade, financial and economic stability, technology and foreign aid to name a few. Environmental factors in addition, rarely if ever factor into the issues of security, human rights and other social concerns, this is clearly something that needs to be addressed. The need for negotiations to an international response is critical, until then the little that can be surely said regarding the issue of climate change is that choices made now will have consequences that stretch long into the future.

7. Questions that Resolutions Should Try and Answer

- Should responses from climate change come from an international consensus or should it be up to individual states to deal with climate change?
- How can we ensure that all nations, regardless of their economic or technological development, support the proposed solutions without making huge concessions? Should the developed countries help developing countries make the transition to green economies?
- Should international regulations be binding?
- Should the carbon trading be adopted by all states?

8. Further Research

Be sure to check out the UN website and also the UNFCCC's website as the later is one of the most influential actors in climate change policy. *An Inconvenient Truth* is a good source on the science behind climate change. Of course, look into the specific policies of your country in relationship to global warming and climate change on their government's webpages. News websites, such as those of the CBC, BBC, and the New York Times, are good sources of news articles relating to this issue and may even have articles relating directly to your country and climate change.

9. Note from the Secretary-General

This committee, like the United Nations in New York, accepts the science of climate change to be true. There are numerous publications that refute this science, and as some countries hold this point of view, it is worthy to look in to it, especially if you are representing a country that doubts the credibility of the science and the seriousness of the environmental troubles that the world is facing.

End Notes

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