

Background to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Kyoto Protocol

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

The UNFCCC, the first international measure to address the problem, was adopted in May 1992 and came into force in March 1994. It established a clear distinction between **industrialised countries** and **developing countries**, because industrialised countries are responsible for most of the current build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere - and therefore should lead in reducing emissions.

The Kyoto Protocol

The Kyoto protocol was a further step in tackling climate change and was adopted in December 1997 in the Japanese town of Kyoto. This protocol sets legally binding limits on greenhouse gas emissions from (originally) 38 industrialised countries and the European Community (the EU-15).

Under the Kyoto Protocol, **industrialised countries are required to reduce their emissions** of six greenhouse gases (CO₂ - the most important one, methane, nitrous oxide, hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons and sulphur hexafluoride) by approximately 5% below the 1990 level during the first Kyoto Protocol 'commitment period' from 2008 to 2012. **There are no emission targets for developing countries.**

The Kyoto Protocol entered into force on 16 February 2005. By February 2006, 160 countries had ratified the Protocol. Three countries that originally signed the treaty have not ratified - the US has rejected the Protocol, Australia has decided not to ratify it and Monaco has not yet ratified. This means there are 35 developed countries and the European Community that are obliged to reach their Kyoto targets.

The Kyoto Protocol envisages three market-based mechanisms, known as the Kyoto flexible mechanisms:

- **Emissions trading** between governments with Kyoto targets: Emissions trading can take place between countries with Kyoto targets. Each country will be assigned a fixed maximum amount of emissions that it may emit over the 2008-2012 period. Countries that emit less, can sell the unused quota to others that emit more. This will allow reductions to take place where they are cheapest.

- **The Clean Development Mechanism (CDM)**: allows industrialised countries to achieve part of their emission reductions by carrying out emission-reducing projects in poorer developing countries through, for example, paying for new energy efficient technologies. The emission reductions that result from this are counted as reductions in the industrialised country.
- **Joint Implementation (JI)**: similar to the CDM, this allows industrialised countries to achieve emission reductions by investing in emission-reducing projects in other industrialised countries with Kyoto targets.

The rationale behind these three mechanisms is that greenhouse gas emissions are a global problem and therefore the place where reductions are actually achieved is irrelevant in scientific terms. In this way, reductions can be made where costs are lowest. CDM and JI aim to transfer advanced technologies to developing countries and help build cooperation between countries with Kyoto targets.

The UN conference in Montreal in 2005

During this conference two meetings were held simultaneously - the 11th Conference of the Parties to UNFCCC (COP-11) and the first ever meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (COP/MOP-1). With some 10,000 participants, it was the largest intergovernmental climate conference since the Kyoto Protocol was adopted. Governments took more than 40 decisions on climate change.

This package of decisions - also referred to as the "Montreal Action Plan" opened the way to a new international framework to tackle climate change after the Protocol's first commitment period ends in 2012. The Parties to the Kyoto Protocol agreed to start discussing, without delay, new emission targets for industrialised countries, to succeed the current targets that have to be met by 2012. In parallel, the 189 UNFCCC Parties - including those that are outside Kyoto, such as the US - agreed to conduct, over the next two years, discussions on long-term cooperative action against climate change. These discussions should lead to a further international framework to tackle climate change.

This is the point at which the MUN conference takes place – where countries are considering targets, measures and actions that will help to tackle climate change beyond 2012.