



COP Explained – Part 1

By

Dr. Sanjay Banerji

Founder Director/Dean of Amrita School of Business



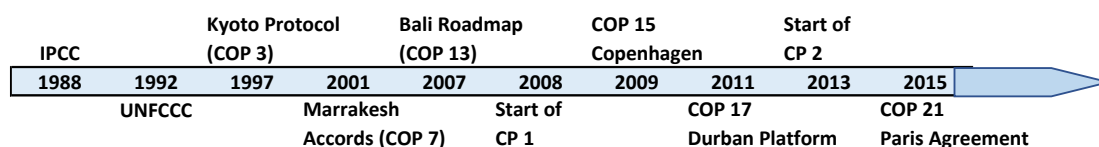
Dear Friends,

Recently, the COP-26 concluded in Glasgow. In this blog, I shall try to briefly explain the background of COP and some of its principal achievements. COP's full form is Conference of the Parties. This inter-governmental body is the supreme decision-making body of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). While tracing the history of the COPs, we must remember that the process of international negotiations is an extremely difficult task, as it is necessary to arrive at some agreement, and multiple pulls and pressures come into play.



I had the opportunity of discussing the role of spirituality in Sustainable Development with one member of our national team. He had a first-hand experience of such negotiations, and he lamented, “At the negotiations, we spend hours fighting if a comma should be there or not, while ignoring such vital issues!” I am writing from memory, and these are not his actual words, but the essence remains intact. For such international agreements to come into effect, a predetermined section (usually 50% or more) of the states must independently ‘ratify’ these agreements within their respective political systems. Ratification means that the nations independently to agree to the provisions of the agreement.

The following timeline captures the significant milestones on the UNFCCC - Conferences of the Parties (COP) [3]. We cover up to COP 17 held in 2011 in this blog. We shall cover the rest in the next month.



The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was created even before the UNFCCC in the year 1988 by World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and was endorsed by the UN General Assembly in the same year. The main objective of IPCC is to carry out scientific assessments on climate change, its implications, potential future risks and possible adaptation and mitigation measures. [1]

Two decades after the first UN conference in Stockholm, global leaders assembled in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil in 1992, and agreed on 3 interlinked conventions:

- UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)
- UN Convention on Biological Diversity
- UN Convention to Combat Desertification

The UNFCCC “established an [international environmental treaty](#) to combat “dangerous [human interference](#) with the [climate system](#)”, in part by stabilizing [greenhouse gas](#) concentrations in the atmosphere” [2]. Please note, the focus was on Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions, ways and means to arrest the emissions and finally to capture and store the atmospheric GHGs (primarily CO₂), also known as carbon sinks.

The nations also agreed upon a mechanism for the implementation of the agreements, and constituted a supreme decision-making body titled ‘Conference of the Parties (COP)’, where all nations who were party to the convention, are represented. The COP is supposed to meet every year at the Bonn (Germany) headquarters of the UNFCCC or at any other host country. **COP 1** was held in Bonn in 1995 and the Parties arrived at ‘a political agreement’ that humanity was facing a great challenge in terms of adverse changes in the global ‘climate system’.

COP 2 was held in Geneva in 1996. The locations of all past COPs may be found at [3] <https://unfccc.int/process/bodies/supreme-bodies/conference-of-the-parties-cop> . As a historical convention, the Presidency of the COP rotates annually among the five UN regions as under [4]:

- African States
- Asia-Pacific States
- Eastern European States
- Latin American and Caribbean States
- Western European and other States (Includes Australia, Canada and USA)

COP 3 was held in Kyoto (Japan) in 1997, and the parties agreed to a binding GHG reduction target for Annex B countries within a first ‘Commitment Period (CP 1)’ from 2008 to 2012. This agreement is known as the “Kyoto Protocol” and I quote:

“37 industrialized countries and the European Community (the European Union-15, made up of 15 states at the time of the Kyoto negotiations) commit themselves to binding targets for GHG emissions. The targets apply to the four greenhouse gases carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄), nitrous oxide (N₂O), sulphur hexafluoride (SF₆), and two groups of gases, hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) and perfluorocarbons (PFCs). The six GHG are translated into CO₂ equivalents in determining reductions in emissions. These reduction targets are in addition to the industrial gases, chlorofluorocarbons, or CFCs, which are dealt with under the 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer” [5].

An important feature of this protocol was the agreed principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’. Essentially, it recognized the fact that the industrialised nations were primarily responsible for the accumulated rise in the GHGs in the atmosphere, and as a result the 37 industrialised countries agreed for some emission reductions during 2008 – 2012, known as the first commitment period (CP 1). Developing nations were exempted, as they were struggling to assure a basic standard of living to its population through development measures, that would necessarily call for higher levels of fossil fuel-based energy consumption and accompanying increase in GHG emissions. As we shall see, very soon this became the bane of contention among industrialised nations, as they felt that developing nations, particularly China, India and Brazil were catching up with the developed nations in terms of gross GHG emissions, although per capita level of GHG emissions were far below those of the industrialised nations.

COP 7 was held in Marrakesh (Morocco). The main objective was to arrive at a ‘legal text’ covering several outstanding technical aspects of how to implement the ‘binding targets for GHG emissions’ [6]. The COP 7 also invited the IPCC to prepare and report papers on geological carbon storage technologies [7].

COP 13 (Dec. 2007) known as the Bali Roadmap, was held in Bali, Indonesia. It adopted a two-year long ‘Action Plan’, aimed at arriving at a ‘binding agreement’ at the forthcoming COP 15 in 2009 in Copenhagen, Denmark. It coincided with the third Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol [8].

COP 15 was held in Copenhagen in 2009. On the sides of the main negotiations under UNFCCC, five countries: USA, India, China, South Africa and Brazil had a separate set of meetings and developed a document titled ‘Copenhagen Accord’ that lacked the stamp of approval of the formal COP body, and was criticized by many. It attempted to replace the legally binding targets under the Kyoto Protocol by independent pledges by many countries, including developing nations. *Perhaps this was an effort to escape from binding targets, and at the same time, rope in the developing nations into some kind of commitments to reduce GHG emissions.* The COP simply ‘took note of it’, without offering any comment [9].

The Copenhagen meet started with a lot of expectations but ended with no agreement on legally binding measures beyond 2012, and many critics called this a failure.

COP 17 was held in Durban in 2011. Some of the key achievements of COP 17 were launching of the Green Climate Fund, formulation of the National Adaptation Plans and specifying the modalities and procedures of the Technology Executive Committee.

Concurrently, the CMP 7 reported the outcome of the work of the Ad Hoc Working Group set up at COP 16. CMP 7 also took decisions on Land use, land-use change and forestry, Emissions trading and the project-based mechanisms, GHG equivalence calculations and environmental, economic and social consequences. Following is an extract from the Opening Address by Ban Ki Moon, UN Secretary General [10]:

Four Goals Ban Ki Moon COP 17

(Abridged version)

Quote:

I expect four things from you at this conference – four incremental advances that will carry us toward the future we want.

First, we must implement what was agreed in Cancún (COP 16). Assisting the most vulnerable is both an obligation and a smart investment in a sustainable future.

Second, we need tangible progress on short – and long-term financing.

Third, the future of the Kyoto Protocol. In the absence of a global binding climate agreement, the Kyoto Protocol is the closest we have. I urge you to carefully consider a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol here in Durban.

Fourth and finally, we must not for sake our collective vision of a comprehensive, binding climate change agreement that is both effective and fair for all.

Time is not on our side, nor is the rest of the world waiting for us to decide.

Across the globe, governments, cities, businesses and individuals have recognized the threat of climate change.

They are acting. They are choosing a lower-carbon path because they know it is good for the planet – and good for them, good for us.

Global investment in clean energy rose from \$50 billion dollars in 2004 to \$240 billion in 2010, according to one recent report.

Governments and the private sector are combining to create a vision for Sustainable Energy for All – a win-win-win for poverty reduction, economic growth and cutting green house gas emissions.

Unquote

We end this blog here, and we shall take up the rest in the next blog. Please feel free to send your comments to s_banerji@amrita.edu

References:

- [1] Source: <https://www.ipcc.ch>
- [2] Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Framework_Convention_on_Climate_Change
- [3] Source: <https://unfccc.int/process/bodies/supreme-bodies/conference-of-the-parties-cop>
- [4] Source: <https://www.un.org/dgacm/en/content/regional-groups>
- [5] Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyoto_Protocol
- [6] Source: <https://www.globalissues.org/article/297/cop7-marrakesh-climate-conference>
- [7] Source: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1471084602800063>
- [8] Source: <https://unfccc.int/process/conferences/the-big-picture/milestones/bali-road-map>
- [9] Source: Hunter, David. "Implications of the Copenhagen Accord for Global Climate Governance." Sustainable Development Law & Policy, Spring 2010, 4-15, 56-57.
- [10] Source: https://unfccc.int/files/meetings/durban_nov_2011/statements/application/pdf/111206_cop17_hls_ban_ki_moon.pdf

