

# UNA-UK BRIEFING PAPER SERIES ON CLIMATE CHANGE

## International Architecture



International institutions are central to the fight against climate change. This paper gives a snapshot of what some of the more relevant international institutions are doing on climate change, and discusses a few of the challenges ahead for the international system in coordinating the world's response.

### Surveillance

At the very heart of international surveillance and analysis of climate change is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which was set up in 1988 by two United Nations organisations: the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). Over its 20-year lifetime, it has produced four Assessment Reports, and in 2007 it shared the Nobel Peace Prize with former US Vice President Al Gore. As important as the IPCC's formal role, however, has been its informal role as an anchor in the climate change debate, proving a platform for discussion that contributed directly to the emergence of a far-reaching scientific consensus. IPCC reports can be found at [www.ipcc.ch](http://www.ipcc.ch). UNEP also publishes the Global Environmental Outlook, its flagship assessment of global environmental trends. The fourth report in the series was published in October 2007, and can be downloaded for free at [www.unep.org/geo/geo4/media](http://www.unep.org/geo/geo4/media).

Looking ahead, perhaps the most important gap in international system surveillance capacities is improving specificity about how climate change will impact particular countries and regions. This information is essential for planning adaptation efforts and reducing the risks of shocks (such as extreme weather events, crop failures or mass movements of people) – but so far, little data is available at this more 'granular' level. It will also be important to integrate climate data with information on conflict risk, economic factors, and other scarcity issues such as energy, food, water security and so on.

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### Decision-making

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process remains the central forum for decision-making on climate change, and is the focus of climate negotiations between now and the UNFCCC Copenhagen summit in 2009. However, a criticism sometimes made of the UNFCCC is that while it may be the right forum at which countries *sign off* on a deal on reducing emissions, it may not also be the best forum at which actually to *negotiate* such a deal – since UNFCCC summits tend to involve only environment ministers and officials, though the issue of climate change extends much further (to encompass transport and energy, for example). It is also sometimes suggested that, given the acute competitiveness issues and political sensitivities of any comprehensive deal on climate change, a long-term global deal will ultimately need to be agreed at the level of heads of state or government.

Climate change has certainly become in recent years an increasing fixture at the level of heads of state. A considerable number of G8 summits have addressed the issue (notably the Gleneagles summit in the UK in 2005 and the Heiligendamm summit in Germany in 2007), and Japan has signalled its intention to include climate change on the agenda for Hokkaido in the summer of 2008. However, some critics have suggested that the G8 may not be an ideal forum either. For one thing, its track record in recent years has often tended towards short-term, media-friendly 'initiatives' (such as the G8 Renewable Energy Task Force in 2000, generally seen to have produced limited results); for another, recent G8 initiatives have also shied away from actions with significant domestic implications.

More fundamentally, though, the G8 is arguably hampered in its capacity to agree comprehensive action on climate change by the fact that some of the world's most significant emitters – including China and India – are excluded from full membership.

Admittedly, recent years have seen the emergence of a ‘+5’ group (comprising China, India, Brazil, South Africa and Mexico) that has regularly attended heads’ meetings; but these countries are excluded from ‘sherpa’ meetings in advance of summits and are only invited to some summit sessions. This situation has led to some calls for a new global leaders’ forum of 20 or 25 countries that would have a mandate to look at global issues including climate change.

However, it is not certain that a new body will improve multilateral decision-making capacity on climate change; it is the more basic factor of political will that explains the failure so far to agree really far-reaching action on climate change.

## Implementation

One problem with the Kyoto Protocol, according to some commentators, is that (compared with other multilateral environmental agreements) it has a relatively weak system for enforcing compliance with agreed targets – even though the targets themselves are supposed to be mandatory. This has led to some speculation about how to improve policing of future emissions targets, for instance through using the trade regime to enforce compliance (although there would be significant practical difficulties with that approach too).

Another challenge likely to become steadily more difficult in the future relates to monitoring, reporting and verification – which are essential to making future climate agreements work effectively. As developing countries become increasingly important to the challenge of stabilising the climate, their relatively limited technical capacity for monitoring their emissions could become a real problem, both for enabling emissions trading systems to work accurately and, more fundamentally, for knowing with any degree of certainty what the world’s total emissions are and hence whether it is on track for the overall target. There is therefore an urgent need for developed countries to increase their help to developing countries on reporting and technology transfer.

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## Multilateral system coherence

Numerous UN agencies and other multilateral actors (including the World Bank and regional development banks) are involved in the implementation of climate change policy – including through supporting national and regional action, and through activities in the areas of adaptation, technology, financing and mitigation. As a result, one of the core challenges for the international system is to bring coherence to this often fragmented system to ensure that – as far as possible at least – duplication of effort is minimised and the whole adds up to more than the sum of its parts.

Despite two recent UN high-level panels that have looked at improving coordination (the 2004 High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, and the 2006 High-level Panel on System-wide Coherence), progress has been patchy. The problem is certainly on the table, and there is some movement towards a more harmonised UN approach to aid work in developing countries. But on the larger issue of harmonising the performance of the international system as a whole on climate change and related ‘scarcity’ risks, there is so far less to report. However, the situation is moving – slowly. In early 2008, the Chief Executives Board for Coordination – a UN system body that brings together the heads not only of UN funds and programmes, but also of specialised agencies such as the World Bank – undertook a major study of how the international system could move towards greater policy coherence on climate change. While this is only a small first step, it is nonetheless encouraging that this oft-delayed process of improving policy coherence on climate change at the supranational level is at last underway.



The UN Association of the UK is Britain’s leading independent policy authority on the UN and a membership organisation which campaigns for a strong, credible and effective United Nations.

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