



# LOBBY FOR THE UNITED NATIONS 2007-08

Background information and suggested questions for MPs

---

## THE UN'S ROLE IN FIGHTING CLIMATE CHANGE

*Prepared by Mark Rusling, UNA-UK Campaigns & Education Officer (October 2007)*

### Some facts about climate change

- Between 1970 and 2004, greenhouse gas emissions increased by 70 per cent.
- The earth is warming faster than at any time in the last 10,000 years.
- At the current rate of warming, 20-30 per cent of animal species face an increased risk of extinction.
- The heatwave during the summer of 2003 (Europe's hottest in 500 years) caused 28,000 premature deaths across the continent.
- The area of the world affected by drought doubled between 1970 and 2000.
- Current climate trends could leave over 3 billion people in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia facing acute water shortages, leading to political instability.
- Drought is an important factor in the crisis in Darfur, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is exacerbated by disputes over access to fresh water.
- By 2050, 30 million more people may be malnourished due to climate change.
- By 2100, 100 million more people may be at risk of flooding in low-lying countries, such as Bangladesh, as well as major cities, such as London and Rome.
- Scientists believe that the average global temperature increase must be kept under 2 degrees Celsius in order to avoid catastrophic climate change. To keep below this threshold, global greenhouse gas emissions must peak and be falling irreversibly by 2015.

### The UN's role

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has made climate change a priority of his leadership. He has said, "Climate change, and how we address it, will define us, our era and ultimately the global legacy we leave for future generations." A key task for the UN is to galvanise international political will in search of concrete solutions to climate change and make governments aware of the true severity of the problem.

One way the UN has done this is through the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), established by the UN Environment Programme and the World Meteorological Organization in 1988. The IPCC, considered the world's most authoritative source of information on climate change, its causes and its effects, does not undertake its own scientific research. Its purpose is instead to provide regular assessments of existing peer-reviewed literature on "the scientific basis of human-induced climate change, its potential impacts and options for adaptation and mitigation". Since its formation the IPCC has released four assessment reports.

The most recent IPCC assessment report was released this year. It put to rest any doubts about the human origins of accelerated climate change, concluding that the link was 90 per cent likely. Its chief findings were as follows:

- By the end of the century temperature will have risen by between 1.8 and 4 degrees Celsius.
- It is more than 60 per cent likely that sea levels will rise by 29-43 centimetres and that climate change will lead to more intense tropical storms.
- It is also more than 60 per cent likely that the Arctic summer sea ice will disappear in the second half of the century. (Recent studies have suggested that this will likely happen much sooner.)
- It is more than 90 per cent likely that the number of heatwaves will grow in certain parts of the world.

The UN makes another important contribution by providing an international framework in which states can undertake negotiations on climate change. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was created in 1992 to prevent "dangerous" anthropogenic interference with the climate system. The Convention, which has been ratified by 191 countries, was envisaged as a work-in-progress – a loose structure to be modified as necessary. Thus, only one year after the UNFCCC came into force, discussions were initiated to strengthen the existing treaty. The Kyoto Protocol – which, though linked to the UNFCCC, in fact

stands on its own – was adopted unanimously in 1997 and entered into force in February 2005 following the ratification of Russia.

The Protocol imposes mandatory, time-bound targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but only upon its rich country signatories. It does not prescribe targets for developing countries, in recognition of the fact that emissions have originated disproportionately in industrialised countries.

## **Bali and Beyond**

The Kyoto Protocol names 2012 as the target date by which its 36 richest signatories should have significantly reduced their emissions. The Protocol also specifies that negotiations need to be undertaken well in advance of 2012 so that a long-term regulatory framework for reducing global emissions can be agreed and established before Kyoto's targets expire. The UN suggests that agreement needs to be reached by 2009 so that there is time to secure the necessary ratifications by 2012. In December 2007, governments will meet in Bali to begin negotiating such an agreement.

In 2001 the US, the world's leading greenhouse gas emitter, announced that it would not ratify the Kyoto Protocol arguing that curbing emissions would jeopardise its economy and that exempting developing countries such as China, Brazil and India from the Kyoto targets was unfair. A formidable challenge for negotiators of a 'Kyoto II' will be to secure stronger contributions from both the principal developing country emitters and parties such as the US, and other countries like Australia, which have thus far been unwilling to commit to mandatory greenhouse gas cuts. Another task for negotiators at Bali will be to incentivise 'green' development for developing countries, which cannot legitimately be asked to make serious economic sacrifices to cut emissions.

While the precise future effects of climate change remain as yet unknown, it is clear that some climate change is inevitable and indeed ongoing; the Bali meeting will therefore also need to produce ways of adapting to the effects of climate change. The consequences will affect developed and less-developed countries alike, but the poor will be hit the hardest – people in low-income countries are four times more likely to die in natural disasters than people in high-income countries.

## **The UK's contribution**

Under the Kyoto Protocol the UK has committed itself to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 12.5 per cent of 1990 levels by 2012. It is on track to fulfil this pledge, and has shown leadership in the international community on climate change, most notably in the G8. However, the UK, with 1 per cent of the world's population, produces 2.3 per cent of the world's carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), the greenhouse gas most responsible for global warming. The UK's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are currently rising.

The government's Climate Change Bill, published in March 2007, calls for a legally binding CO<sub>2</sub> emissions cut of 60 per cent by 2050. The legislation would also set up a system of five-yearly carbon budgets, and a Committee on Climate Change to monitor compliance. But the bill does not go far enough. Many experts believe that the target should be an 80 per cent cut in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 2050, and that the carbon budgets should be annual. The bill allows for a significant proportion of the envisaged emissions cuts to be obtained through the purchase of carbon emissions reductions in developing countries – thus not actually reducing the UK's emissions and potentially registering emission cuts of questionable validity. The bill also controversially exempts the aviation and shipping industries from its targets.

## **Ask your MP:**

- How will the government contribute to building a more inclusive longer-term regulatory framework for cutting global greenhouse gas emissions when the Kyoto Protocol's targets expire, one which brings on board countries such as the US, Canada and Australia and growing emitters like China, Brazil and India?
- How is the government – through the Department for International Development and other relevant departments of state – helping poor countries to adapt to the effects of natural disasters, which are made worse by the impact of climate change?
- How will the government reduce the impact on the environment of emissions from shipping and air transport?
- How can the government justify allowing for such a significant proportion of the planned emission cuts to be derived from the purchase of emissions reductions made in developing countries?
- Will the government commit in a future Climate Change Act to annual carbon budgets?
- How is the government working to reduce the UK's industrial CO<sub>2</sub> emissions?