



UNFCCC

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

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## Fact sheet: An introduction to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its Kyoto Protocol

### *Climate change science and effects*

The effects of global climate change are becoming ever more evident. Scientists believe that climate change is already causing more frequent occurrences of drought, flooding and rises in malaria. Other phenomena attributed to climate change are increased incidents of hurricanes and forest fires. Among the long-term impacts are rising sea levels and damage to crops which can lead to wide-spread famine. Some of the most serious effects of climate change are occurring in countries least prepared to counter them.

Global warming is caused by an excess of heat-trapping gases, first and foremost carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxides. These gases mainly result from the burning of fossil fuels, from agriculture and from waste dumps. The gases prevent the sun's energy from radiating back into space after it has reached the surface of the earth, much like the glass of a greenhouse.

### *The Convention and the Protocol*

In 1992, the **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)** was adopted as the basis for a global response to the problem. With 192 Parties, the Convention enjoys near-universal membership. The ultimate objective of the Convention is to stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that will prevent dangerous human interference with the climate system.

The Convention is complemented by the 1997 **Kyoto Protocol**, which has 183 Parties. Under this treaty, 37 industrialised countries and the European Community have committed to reducing their emissions by an average of 5 percent by 2012 against 1990 levels. Industrialized countries must first and foremost take domestic action against climate change. But the Protocol also allows them to meet their emission reduction commitments abroad through so-called "market-based mechanisms".

For example, one of the Protocol's market-based mechanisms, the **clean development mechanism (CDM)**, permits industrialized countries to earn emission credits through investment in sustainable development projects that reduce emissions in developing countries. Under the CDM, projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions in developing countries and contribute to sustainable development can earn certified emission reduction (CER) credits. Countries with a commitment under the Kyoto Protocol buy CERs to cover a portion of their emission reduction commitments under the Treaty. There are currently more than 1240 registered CDM projects in 51 countries, and about another 3000 projects in the project registration pipeline. The CDM is expected to generate more than 2.9 billion CERs by the time the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol ends in 2012, each equivalent to one tonne of carbon dioxide.

The UNFCCC and its Kyoto Protocol are also designed to assist countries in adapting to the inevitable effects of climate change. They facilitate the development of techniques that can help increase resilience to climate change impacts – for example, the development of salt-resistant crops – and to exchange best practices with regard to adaptation.