

# The Copenhagen Accord

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*Environmental Encyclopedia*, 2011 Updated: July 28, 2016  
From Opposing Viewpoints in Context

Near the end of the December 2009 conference on [climate](#) change held in Copenhagen, Denmark--a summit attended by more than 100 heads of state--contentious negotiations produced the Copenhagen Accord, an international agreement aimed at mitigating [global warming](#) and the impacts of [climate change](#).

## The Copenhagen Accord

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The fifteenth Conference of the Parties (COP) to the [United Nations](#) Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) took place at Copenhagen, Denmark, in December 2009. Instead of an anticipated comprehensive and legally binding international agreement to replace the Kyoto Protocols that expire in 2012, the global summit of 193 nations and more than 100 world leaders produced the Copenhagen Accord. The Accord creates an international reporting and verification scheme aimed at meeting voluntary and individual targets related to a range of climate change issues. The Accord began as an agreement negotiated by the [United States](#) and the BASIC bloc of nations (China India, Brazil, and South Africa), representing the leading greenhouse gas emitters in the world.

## Controlling global warming

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While recognizing the need to limit temperature rises to less than 2°Celsius (3.6°Fahrenheit), the limit beyond which scientific evidence asserts that climate change consequences become especially dire, the Copenhagen Accord fails to set firm [emissions](#) targets. The language of the Accord does not actually set a formal limit for acceptable average global temperature rise, but merely "recognizes the scientific view" that global temperature increases should be held to less than 2°Celsius.

Critics of the Accord immediately argued that the majority of accepted scientific studies indicate that the current pledges of voluntary emissions reductions will be insufficient to limit temperature rise to 2°Celsius. During the conference, representatives of small-island nations expressed hopes that negotiations might lead to stronger cuts in emissions that could limit temperature increase to 1.5°Celsius (2.6°Fahrenheit) in order to further mitigate the extent and impacts of [sea level](#) rise.

The Accord also fails to set a target year for peak emissions or specify a target date to conclude a legally binding treaty. The Accord calls only for a review of its provisions and implementation by 2015, more than a year after the next set of formal reports by the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC) is scheduled to be published.

## Emissions limits versus carbon-intensity targets

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The Accord does, however, for the first time include pledges by China, India, and other emerging industrial powers to accept some limits on emissions, along with an agreement to submit to international emissions reporting. Countries are asked to specify by February 2010 their individual targets for 2020 carbon emissions. The Accord does not, however, specify penalties for countries failing to set targets or for failure to meet the target ultimately set.

Separate from the Accord negotiations, China and India set carbon-intensity targets (levels of emissions related to measures of economic development such as gross domestic product) rather than specific limits based on the quantity of emissions. Setting carbon-intensity targets allows developing nations to continue to increase the total quantity of their carbon emissions as their industrializing economies continue to expand.

## Financial aid to poor and vulnerable nations

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The Accord also promises \$30 billion in aid to developing nations over the next three years to help them cope and adapt to climate change. Although mechanisms for monitoring and delivery of aid remain to be negotiated, the amount of aid is scheduled to escalate to \$100 billion by 2020. A green climate fund will also support technology transfers aimed at lowering GHG emissions by increasing [energy efficiency](#) in developing nations.

## Accord status and initial pledges

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The Accord was not endorsed by all 193 nations at the talks. Lacking the unanimous vote needed for formal approval, conference administrators were only able to officially "note" or recognize the agreement.

In December 2009, the [World Meteorological Organization](#) (WMO) released data showing that the decade 2000 to 2009 was the warmest in modern recorded history. WMO officials refuted other reports claiming to show that global warming had leveled off since 1998, the hottest year in history. Some leveling off or cooling was expected after the surge to 1998 peak levels, but overall, the first decade of the twenty-first century proved warmer than the 1990s and 1980s. Although there are minor differences in rankings of hottest years, the WMO data closely conforms to independent studies made by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

Despite the WMO data, the initial voluntary national pledges made in response to the Copenhagen Accord failed to achieve a common baseline for cuts by the year 2020. For example, the United States pledged to cut carbon emission by 17 percent of 2005 levels while the European Union pledged a 20 to 30 percent reduction from 1990 levels. Moreover, climate and energy experts argue that, as of November 2010, the United States has failed to pass energy legislation that would allow it to honor its current commitments to the Accord. China and India continued to relate emissions policy to economic activity. Instead of specific limits, China pledged to reduce its carbon intensity by 40 to 45 percent compared with 2005 levels, and India pledged to reduce carbon intensity by 20 to 25 percent of 2005 levels. Setting carbon-intensity targets allows developing nations to continue to increase the total

quantity of their carbon emissions as their industrializing economies continue to expand.

In December 2011, 194 nations attending the 17th annual Conference of the Parties (COP17) in Durban, South Africa, reached an agreement that could result in a greenhouse gas reduction treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol and incorporate the principles of the Copenhagen accord.

The 195 parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) met in global conferences over the Internet and in Bonn, Germany, in May 2012 to begin a series of meetings and working-groups to work toward enshrining a new treaty encompassing agreements made at the 2011 Durban conference. The expectation is that the new agreement will be signed in 2015 and take effect in 2020. The new treaty will replace the Kyoto Protocol, but will feature the notable change of binding both wealthy industrialized and developing nations under the same legal framework for emissions reduction or containment commitments. Such a framework acknowledges that wealthy industrialized nations bear most of the responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but developing nations such as China, Brazil, India, and others are ascending rapidly among the ranks of the world's biggest current emitters and likely will produce more pollution as their economies grow during the twenty-first century.

Conferences in Durban, South Africa (COP 17, 2011), and in Doha, Qatar (COP 18, 2012), produced commitments for legally binding agreements to be negotiated by the Paris conference in 2015, as well as an amendment to the Kyoto Protocol by some prior signatories extending its provisions to 2020. COP19 in Warsaw, Poland, and COP 20 held in Lima, Peru in 2014 aimed to prepare documents and start negotiations toward a new post-Kyoto emissions treaty finalized at COP 21 at Paris in 2015.

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## Further Readings

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### Resources

#### Books

- Giddens, Anthony. *Politics of Climate Change*, 2nd ed. Cambridge, UK, and Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2011.
- Hulme, Mike. *Why We Disagree about Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity*. Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Metz, Bert, et al, eds. *Climate Change 2007: Mitigation of Climate Change: Contribution of Working Group III to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Page, Edward. *Climate Change, Justice and Future Generations*. Cheltenham, UK, and Northampton, Mass.: Edward Elgar, 2006.
- Solomon, Susan, et al. "IPCC, 2007: Summary for Policymakers." In *Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, edited by Susan Solomon et al. Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

#### Other

- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). "IPCC Assessment Reports." <http://www.ipcc.ch/> (accessed May 31, 2016).

- United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). "United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)." <http://unfccc.int/2860.php> (accessed May 31, 2016).

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**Source Citation**

"The Copenhagen Accord." *Environmental Encyclopedia*, Gale, 2011. *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*, [link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CV2644151549/OVIC?u=nysl\\_sc\\_delcm&xid=6b82b3cc](http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CV2644151549/OVIC?u=nysl_sc_delcm&xid=6b82b3cc). Accessed 6 Jan. 2017.

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|CV2644151549