

Global Climate Agreements Through the Years

November 18, 2020 | Re-Shared Courtesy of the **Climate Reality Project**

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This week, the 26th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – commonly known as COP 26 – was scheduled to kick off in Glasgow, UK. But amidst a raging pandemic that has made in-person gatherings unsafe, the conference was postponed a year, and will instead take place in November 2021.

For climate activists around the world, the decision to postpone may have come as a letdown, even if the rationale was understandable. Five years ago in Paris, the parties present at COP 21 set forth a historic agreement that brought nearly every nation in the world together on a vision to seriously combat the climate crisis. There was real hope that COP 26 could deliver another major step to strengthen the Paris Agreement.

Because while Paris was a major milestone, it was far from the first step the global community has taken on climate. Driven by activists and climate scientists around the world, the member states of the UNFCCC have been working for climate solutions for decades now.

- **1987 – [Montreal Protocol](#):** In response to the deterioration of the ozone layer, member states of the United Nations come together to regulate nearly 100 chemicals known as ozone depleting substances. The Montreal Protocol was ratified by all 197 member states, making it the only UN treaty ever ratified by every member. While the agreement was focused on ozone restoration, it proved that the global community can unify around urgent environmental action, and deliver results.
- **1992 – [Earth Summit](#):** The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, also called the [Earth Summit](#), opened UNFCCC for signature. By year's end, 158 nations had signed on to UNFCCC, paving the way for annual Conferences of the Parties (COP).
- **1995 – [COP 1](#):** The first COP was held in Germany in 1995, and was [overseen by Angela Merkel](#), then a minister in the German government responsible for environmental issues. COP 1 laid the foundation for future meetings and delivered the [Berlin Mandate](#), which set forth a process for combatting the climate crisis in the new millennium.
- **1997 – [Kyoto Protocol](#):** COP 3 produced the [world's first international treaty](#) requiring the reduction of global warming pollution, with industrialized nations agreeing to cumulatively cut their greenhouse gas to 5 percent below 1990 levels within 10–15 years. Notably, India and China had yet to enter their economic booms, and thus were not considered industrialized nations for purposes of the protocol and are not subject to the requirements. And while 192 nations would eventually adopt the Kyoto Protocol, the United States does not, undermining the agreement.
- **2001 – [Marrakesh Accords](#):** Representatives from 160 nations meet to [further plan](#) out implementation of the Kyoto Protocol, including differentiations between developed nations and transitioning nations.

- **2005 – [Kyoto Protocol goes into effect](#):** After nearly a decade of work on its implementation, the Kyoto Protocol goes into effect. In the ensuing years, many nations – including the European Union – would meet their targets and cut emissions. That progress, however, was more than offset by countries like the US and China continuing to increase emissions.
- **2009 – COP 15:** When world leaders gathered in Copenhagen for COP 15, there were high hopes for a legally binding treaty to build off of the Kyoto Protocol. Instead, nations were [unable to agree on firm targets](#) and left instead with just a non-binding accord. Still, the conference did produce some progress on setting targets and implementation mechanisms, as well as establishing a goal of \$100 billion per year in financing for developing nations to shift towards low-carbon development and build resilience.
- **2011 – COP 17:** Countries [meeting in Durban](#) agree to develop a “protocol, another legal instrument or an agreed outcome with legal force” that would be “applicable to all Parties.” The agreement in Durban lays the foundation for a binding, universal agreement to come in the following years.
- **2013 – [Warsaw Mechanism for Loss and Damage](#):** COP 19 saw the establishment of the first formalized international mechanism for dealing with loss and damage, a term [broadly understood](#) to mean the negative consequences of the climate crisis that cannot be avoided through mitigation and adaptation. Developing and vulnerable nations have long pushed for action on loss and damage and continue to call for further action.
- **2015 – Paris Agreement:** After years of struggling to achieve a broad agreement that could build upon the Kyoto Protocol, COP 21 delivered the Paris Agreement – [the most ambitious global climate agreement the world has ever seen](#). The Paris Agreement set an overarching goal to keep warming “well below” 2 degrees Celsius while “pursuing efforts” to keep it under 1.5 degrees, and included each nation offering specific, challenging targets that they felt were achievable, even if they have so far been inadequate. With China, India, and the US on board at its signing, this historic accord gave the world both the framework to halt rising temperatures and the international muscle to do it. Unfortunately, there was a major setback when the [Trump Administration refused to act on US commitments and then removed the country from the agreement](#) earlier this month. But by design, the Paris Agreement offers an easy path for nations to re-enter the agreement – and President-elect Joe Biden [has pledged to return the US to the accord](#) on his first day in office.
- **2019 – Climate Action Summit:** Set against the backdrop of youth climate strikes around the globe, UN Secretary-General António Guterres convened a special summit to focus on the need for urgent action and encourage nations to enhance their pledges to cut carbon emissions. [And 70 nations stepped up](#), committing to cut emissions by more than their Paris pledges. But those nations represented just 6.8 percent of global emissions – and with the US, China, and India offering few concrete promises, the summit did not deliver the hoped-for breakthrough.
- **2020 – Postponement of COP 26:** Recognizing that deeper emissions reductions would be required to meet the challenge, countries agreed at COP 21 to [update or enhance their first Paris Agreement commitments](#) by the end of 2020. But COP 26’s postponement has limited countries’ ability to pressure each other to do so. The United Kingdom hopes to [encourage higher commitments](#) on December 12, the fifth anniversary of the Paris Agreement adoption.

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