

## Let's clarify COP21

### The glossary of the 21st Conference of the Parties

The 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change opened its doors on 30 November in Paris, Parc des Expositions le Bourget. During these days of negotiations you will surely come across articles, news, television reports and debates illustrating and documenting the most important moments of COP21. It is very likely, therefore, that you will see acronyms, abbreviations, and terms such as UNFCCC, IPCC, mitigation, Climate finance, Green Climate Fund and much more. If you are wondering what these terms mean, this glossary is for you!

#### 2°C

2°C is the temperature increase limit recognised by the scientific community to limit global warming and its impacts. According to the IPCC (see below) a temperature increase of more than 2°C compared to pre-industrial levels would lead to irreversible changes in the Earth's climate, with disastrous consequences for our planet and its inhabitants. To reach the 2°C target, the IPCC estimates that greenhouse gas emissions must be reduced by 40-70% by 2050 and by 2100 should be zero. In reality, not all the scientific community is in agreement with this value: for some the temperature increase should not be more than 1.5°C, for others considering only the temperature increase is too simplistic because there are many climate factors involved.

#### IPCC

When one talks of climate change one cannot help evoking the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, better known as the IPCC. The IPCC, the international scientific body responsible for the collection, analysis and synthesis of the latest climate research results, was established in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in order to "provide a clear scientific view of the current state of knowledge on climate change and its potential environmental and socio-economic effects". One of the tasks of the IPCC is to periodically publish the Assessment Report on Climate Change (AR), a publication that contains everything we know about our planet's climate, the impacts and vulnerability of natural, social and economic systems, and the possible mitigation strategies, proposing economic forecasts. The first Report was published in 1990; this first edition was followed by those of 1995, 2001, 2007 and finally the latest of 2014, the fifth (AR5).

#### UNFCCC

One vowel and as many as five consonants in a row, UNFCCC, are used to indicate the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. It consists of an international treaty that recognises the anthropogenic nature of climate change in the post-industrial era and that has initiated a process for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions with binding commitments for industrialised countries, implementing market instruments for reducing emissions based on efficiency criteria. The Convention, established in Rio in 1992, came into force on 21 March 1994 and was ratified by 195 nations and by the European Union.

The UNFCCC immediately attracted the attention of the public, of science and of the institutions after Rio, given the really important proportions that the climate change phenomenon is assuming, to which historically above all the industrialised countries have contributed and to which today and in the near future also emerging economies - fast growing and in need of energy - will contribute significantly.

#### COP

The UNFCCC (now we know what it is!) establishes that every year the signatory countries of the Convention meet to participate in the "Conference of Parties", abbreviated as COP - to the Convention. The first took place in Berlin in 1995 (COP1) and this year we speak of COP21. We have, in fact, arrived at the twenty-first Conference. The COP is the governing body of the Convention through which countries take decisions and commitments and conclude agreements. On the UNFCCC website you can retrace all the milestones that have led to the COP21 in Paris, [click here](#)

<http://unfccc.int/timeline/>.

### **COP21**

At the event in Paris, chaired by French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, 195 nations plus the European Union are taking part. In all, 40,000 people will be operationally involved, of which 25,000 official delegates, consisting not only of government representatives but also NGOs, UN agencies, intergovernmental organisations and civil society, as well as 3,000 accredited journalists. The objective of COP21 is to achieve, on 11 December (the date of closure of proceedings), one of the strongest international environmental treaties ever, envisaging the reduction of CO2 emissions and climate change mitigation (more details under the item Agreement).

### **INDC**

The acronym INDC, which stands for "Intended Nationally Determined Contribution", indicates the commitments on reducing greenhouse gas emissions that participating countries have voluntarily submitted prior to COP21.

As of today (3 December ) 157 INDCs have been submitted (more information here) representing 184 countries (146 of which submitted the document by 1 October, non-binding deadline established by the UN). The European Union has a single document on behalf of the 28 Member States. According to Climate Inter Active, mere compliance with the INDCs, without further subsequent commitments, would lead to an increase in global temperatures of approx. 3.5°C. According to Climate Action Tracker, should the INDCs and other commitments taken by States be respected, global temperatures would anyway increase by approx. 2.7°C. The 2°C target can only be achieved if the commitments are periodically revised, each time increasing the level of ambition of the subsequent climate plans. One of the primary goals of COP21 is precisely to approve a mechanism for periodic review of the INDCs, establishing the review every five years.

### **Adaptation and mitigation**

These are the two strategies to address climate change. Adaptation includes measures to protect against the effects of climate change, such as dams for coastal cities against rising sea levels. Mitigation includes measures and policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, including the development of renewable energy.

### **Climate Finance**

The term Climate Finance indicates investments and financial transactions aimed at the "stabilisation and reduction" of greenhouse gas emissions to improve the defences of territories against the harmful effects of climate change and at adaptation and resilience strategies against climate change.

### **Green Climate Fund**

The Green Climate Fund, established at COP16 in Cancun, is an international body based in Incheon (South Korea) that ensures transfer from industrialised to developing countries of technologies and funding aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions and implementing measures for adaptation to and mitigation of climate change.

### **100 billion goal**

This is an agreement between all parties to the UNFCCC proposed at the end of the Copenhagen conference in 2009 and completed the following year in Cancun. Under this agreement, industrialised countries undertake to deploy \$100 billion a year from 2020 in actions to counter the effects of climate change in developing countries. Both the Green Climate Fund and the transactions identified with the term Climate Finance contribute to the achievement of the "100 billion goal."

### **Carbon neutrality**

Carbon neutrality defines a situation in which the balance of emissions released into the atmosphere is equal to zero.

### **Kyoto Protocol**

The Kyoto Protocol is an international agreement drawn up in the eponymous Japanese city in 1997 during COP3, which has long been a benchmark in the fight against climate change. The measure came into full effect on 16 February 2005 with the adhesion of Russia (in November 2004), which allowed the minimum number of countries required by the Treaty

to be reached, corresponding to 55% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

The importance of the Kyoto Protocol resides primarily in recognition by industrialised countries of their responsibility for the current greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere. The signatories of the document (remember that the Protocol was never ratified by the United States, the largest emitter among industrialised countries) undertook to reduce their emissions between 2008 and 2012, to a different extent for each country, compared to the values recorded in 1990. In 2012, during COP18 in Doha, a document committing the countries involved to a second commitment period (2013-2020) was envisaged, but failure to reach the minimum number of participating countries has so far blocked its entry into force .

### Agreement

Finally, we come to the key word of COP21: reaching an agreement. Although a draft agreement signed on 23 October in Bonn, Germany, is already in circulation, it is still unclear what will come out of the negotiations in Paris and what actually the official document will contain. First of all, it must be clarified whether the commitments that countries take during COP21 will be part of a binding agreement. On the one hand, in fact, there are countries in the developing world and the European Union calling for a binding treaty at the international level, while other countries, such as China and the United States, are aiming for an agreement whose only constraints are national laws and regulations. Achievement of the 100 billion goal will also be discussed, in particular how to support developing countries and the possibility of setting up a body to supervise and control the flow of funding, ensuring maximum transparency.

An ideal agreement should be able to actively involve all participating countries in the 2°C target, be flexible so that it can take into account individual circumstances in each country, provide a balance between adaptation and mitigation policies and plan adequate implementation of financial and technological resources. Also, it should consider a system of regular review of commitments and results and take into account the economic impact of abandoning fossil fuels.

In conclusion, we can say that the presentation of such a large number of INDCs is a definite sign of optimism concerning the possibility of signing a global agreement in Paris in which each country honours its commitments, albeit in a "differentiated" manner. After years of postponements and passing the buck between countries, the climate change challenge is becoming truly global.

by *Benedetta Palazzo*