



THE WOODS HOLE RESEARCH CENTER

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The Challenge of Global Climate Change

Implementing the Kyoto Protocol

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The Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is one of the most significant international environmental agreements ever crafted, with potentially profound worldwide economic impacts. But some criticize the Protocol as woefully inadequate for reducing the risks of climate change. Why the extreme range of possibilities? The answer lies in the history and politics of an agreement that led to new obligations for industrialized countries without obvious new commitments for developing countries.

The 1992 agreement adopted at the Rio Earth Summit has been ratified by 174 countries, each accepting "common but differentiated responsibilities" for protecting the global climate. Industrialized countries took on "voluntary" commitments to return emissions by year 2000 to 1990 levels. Developing countries joined industrialized countries in general commitments to take climate change into account and implement measures to minimize climate change's adverse environmental effects.

At the Climate Convention's first Conference of the Parties (Berlin, April 1995), countries reached two important conclusions. First, existing commitments were unlikely to be met by 2000 and additional measures were needed for the period beyond 2000. New, legally binding commitments would be required. Second, actions by industrialized countries alone would not stabilize greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations at safe levels because developing country emissions would surpass those of industrial countries around 2030. Nonetheless, in recognition of "differentiated responsibilities," it was agreed that initially only industrialized countries would take on legally binding commitments.

The Berlin decisions generated predictable reaction from some US companies and the US Congress. Prior to the Third Conference of the Parties in Kyoto, the US Senate adopted the Byrd-Hagel resolution, arguing that any Kyoto agreement not including specific commitments by developing countries would be considered unfair to the US.

In Kyoto, developing countries argued passionately that they could not now accept any legally binding commitments to future emissions reductions. Their coalition - the G-77 and China - came close to falling apart over this question, revealing substantial tensions within the group. On the one side, oil producing countries were concerned that GHG emission limits would reduce oil sales and revenues. On another, the island nations faced risks from sea level rise and storm surges. The sub-Saharan African countries aligned themselves with island nations because they too are vulnerable to the impacts of global climate change. The large developing countries (e.g., China, India, and Brazil) argued that it is unfair for them to be required to reduce emissions, unless industrialized countries (e.g., the United States) take the lead. Others, several in Latin America, aspire either to join an expanded North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) or the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), making emissions limitations possibly acceptable.



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Despite division of interests and opinions, the message from Kyoto is clear: All countries must eventually bear legally binding commitments. But how the international climate regime evolves to address questions of fairness and equity will determine when developing countries join industrial countries in accepting additional commitments.

To encourage developing countries in taking on additional commitments, all industrial countries must show their good faith by ensuring that the Kyoto Protocol quickly enters into force and by meeting most of their emission reduction commitments domestically. In the near term, the success of the Kyoto Protocol will depend heavily on US leadership. To secure ratification, the US Administration must demonstrate to its electorate and Congress that implementing the Protocol will strengthen, not damage, the US economy. The US must also work with developing countries to facilitate economic development while limiting growth of GHG emissions. The US should lend financial support to initiatives currently underway that achieve these goals. The US can encourage similar initiatives and finance the deployment of new technologies. Only when developing countries are persuaded that they can limit emissions without stifling development will they consider binding legal commitments for themselves.