



Why the Kyoto Protocol is a Historic Milestone

On February 16th 2005—more than seven years after the text of the treaty was initially agreed-- “Kyoto”, a protocol to the UN Framework Convention on climate change signed at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, finally achieves the status of a treaty in force in terms of international law.

This Protocol has often been criticized for its lack of ambition. For instance, its overall target is a reduction in emissions in industrialised countries of only 5.2 % below 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012. Even its staunchest supporters admit that this level of reductions is seriously deficient if maintained. But the underlying premise of this Protocol has always been that it is only a small first step towards protecting the climate, and that reductions will be progressively stepped up over succeeding 5 year cycles. Despite this weakness, the Protocol is a unique multilateral political agreement, and represents a milestone in international environmental protection. It contains many significant positive aspects.

Firstly, Kyoto puts in place a legally binding international system with reduction targets, which are attached to a compliance system in order to monitor and ensure that countries fulfil their commitments. The Protocol is therefore crucial for implementation of the overall objective of the Rio Convention on climate change. Indeed, the ambitious objective of this Convention is to achieve *“the stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system”*.

Of particular importance is the fact that the overwhelming majority of the International Community has now ratified Kyoto. As of January 2005, around 140 countries had become Parties to the treaty. Even more relevant is that nearly all industrialised countries—with the significant exception of the USA and Australia—have accepted legally binding emissions targets, either for reductions, or at the very least, for limitation.

Kyoto also enhances the call for a more equitable relationship between Southern and Northern countries as embodied by the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities established in Rio (1992). Its provisions emphasize the need for the transfer of new and additional resources from Northern countries to the poorer countries of the South. In particular, it specifies North-South transfer of ecologically sound technologies, new and additional funding for capacity building and support for adaptation to climate change in poorer countries more threatened by climate change than their Northern counterparts. The Protocol thus establishes a new obligation on the highly industrialised rich countries to help poorer ones to achieve sustainable development while nevertheless adapting to climate change and gradually acquiring the capacity to participate in the overall global effort to mitigate emissions.

Secondly, politically speaking, Kyoto has already succeeded in making climate change a top issue within the international agenda for co-operation, development and trade. With the significant exception of the Bush Administration in the United States, very few governments now contest the argument that climate change poses a major threat to human life and health. The Protocol has contributed to a push for enhanced international cooperation, better governance, better monitoring and reporting, and a greater emphasis on equity in dealing with the problems linked to climate change.

Finally, Kyoto has had a significant influence on public awareness at the domestic level in many countries. In the absence of the Protocol, most of the countries would not have made any effort to pass the policies and measures against climate change that many now have in place today. Kyoto has created a new dynamic for the promotion of energy efficiency and the propagation of renewable energies as well as for tackling this matter through an inter-sectorial approach. Similarly, it has spurred policy makers and researchers into developing monetary and fiscal tools to harness economic goods to the overall good of humankind and its environment. Last but not least, as a result of the fractious international negotiations involved in finally delivering Kyoto—particularly following President Bush’s decision to step out of the process—NGOs and the media have had to explain to civil society why these debates are so contentious

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and why the issue matters so much. This has led to increased public awareness of the importance of climate change, and an emphasis on the urgency of multilateral and individual actions in order to prevent dangerous and irreversible human interference with the global atmosphere.

With the entry into force of the Kyoto Protocol, this significant legal, political, and environmental achievement is now in the hands of the countries that have ratified to put into place. This critical step of ensuring the treaty's international legitimacy must now be followed by the domestic implementation efforts necessary for countries to meet their established targets. The credibility of Kyoto countries will be at stake as the global community continues to monitor progress on this critical treaty. That progress must involve not only the collective efforts of Kyoto countries to meet their targets, but also a firm commitment and concrete action to define the next steps for further action in the post-2012 time period. By joining together in an ongoing effort to protect the climate, the Kyoto countries will provide proof of their commitment and will further isolate and pressure the non-Parties to join the global effort.