

How Are Policy Makers Responding to Global Climate Change?

Number 8/13

Fact Sheet

"No state is completely free to cause damage to the environment".

Climate Change

The beginning

The First World Climate Conference was the international gathering to recognise climate change as a serious problem. This major scientific meeting held in February 1979 issued a declaration calling on the world's governments "to foresee and prevent potential man-made changes in climate that might be adverse to the well-being of humanity".

There have been many international conferences on climate change convened and attended by policy makers, government leaders and scientists since then. United Nations special agencies, the European Community, the Commonwealth, the South Pacific Forum, the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme and individual governments such as Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Western Samoa have initiated international, regional and national gatherings to discuss the issue of global warming.

The important meetings

The important international meetings to address the scientific and policy issues on climate change include meetings at:

International:

- *Toronto and Ottawa* on "Models for the Climate Treaty";
- *The Hague*, resulting in the "Ministerial Declaration of Climate Change";
- *Noordwijk*, resulting in the "Ministerial Declaration of Climate Change"; and,
- *Bergen*, for the "Conference on Sustainable Development".

Regional:

- *South Pacific Forum Meeting*, Tarawa, Kiribati, 1988;
- *Intergovernmental Meeting on Climate Change and Sea Level Rise in the South Pacific*, Majuro, Marshall Islands, 1989; and,
- *Second Meeting on Climate Change and Sea Level Rise in the South Pacific*, Noumea, New Caledonia, 1992.

Up to March 1992, climate change conferences have not produced any legally binding treaty. The first legal treaty came when the *Framework Convention on Climate Change* (FCCC) was signed by many countries at the Earth Summit; or UNCED in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992.

Before Rio, most Conferences adopted and issued declarations, resolutions and other political statements outlining the conclusions and recommendations of meetings. While these were not legally binding, they did show the positive global commitment to tackle the problem of climate change. These contributed to the basis of the FCCC.

Framework Convention on Climate Change

The FCCC is a legally-binding global treaty on climate change. It is the result of substantial efforts by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which was created by UNEP and WMO in 1988 to review scientific evidence and the likely social and economical impacts of climate change. The IPCC was also charged to recommend strategies and legal instruments for responding to the problem.

The first IPCC report was adopted in August 1990, and was the basis for discussion at the Second World Climate Conference on November 1990.

Action

Many countries have already responded with unilateral legal action at the national level. OECD member states have set up their own national targets for stabilising and reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. Before the FCCC was signed, customary international laws offered policy makers relevant legal principles:

"No state is completely free to cause damage to the environment".

The amended 1987 *Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer* also legally obliges countries to phase out chloro-fluoro-carbons (CFC) by 2000. The 1979 *Geneva Convention on Long Range Transboundary Air Pollution and its protocols* regulate the emission of some noxious gases, some of which are precursors for greenhouse gases.

