

At Bonn, stay the course



Between November 6 and 17 this year, world leaders, delegates from various countries and others from business, along with media and other representatives of civil society will gather at Bonn for the 23rd Conference of Parties (COP-23) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

The meeting will primarily concentrate on various aspects associated with the implementation of the Paris Agreement (PA), which was negotiated at COP-21 and entered into force, or became legally binding, on November 4, 2016.

Introduction:

The UN Climate Change Conference – COP 23 will take place at the World Conference Centre Bonn (WCCB) in Bonn, Germany and will be presided over by the Government of Fiji. It is fitting that a Pacific island nation chairs this year's COP as the very existence of low-lying islands is threatened by sea level rise due to climate change.

The following bodies will be included in session according to UNFCCC:

- The Conference of the Parties (COP 23);
- The Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP 13);
- The Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement (CMA 1.2);
- The Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI 47) – supports the work of the three bodies through assessment and review.
- The Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA 47) – assists on science and technology.
- The Ad Hoc Working Group on the Paris Agreement (APA 1.4) – tasked with important issues such as NDCs, adaptation, transparency, and global stocktake

The decision-making bodies for the Convention, the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement are the COP, the CMP and the CMA, respectively.

What are the different issues that will be covered in COP23?

The meetings in Bonn will cover a wide range of issues, including

- Adjusting to living in a warmer world with the associated impacts – known as adaptation to climate change and reduction in greenhouse gases – referred to as mitigation.

- They will also include sessions on loss and damage, or the means of addressing economic and non-economic losses and potential injury associated with climate change.
- The discussions will be about the implementation of targets that were decided by each country ahead of the Paris meeting, referred to as the nationally determined contributions (NDCs), and the finance, capacity building and technology transfer required by developing countries from rich nations.

Must embrace the Paris Agreement's ambitious target of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius

The Paris Agreement calls for concerted action to hold the increase in global average temperature to less than 2 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial levels. The fact is that change is occurring at a faster rate than we believed when the Paris Agreement was forged. That means that we must embrace the Paris Agreement's more ambitious target of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius and achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 at the latest. This required renewed understanding of the policies and actions required to stay within a lower target.

- Half a degree reduction may seem really small, but in terms of the impacts on ecosystems, geophysical cycles and diverse life forms on earth, this is a substantial difference.
- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has therefore undertaken the task of preparing a special report on the impacts of a warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and the global response needed to achieve these.
- The limiting warming to 1.5 °C is not yet a geophysical impossibility. But this requires continuing to strengthen pledges for 2030, deepening the mitigation targets rapidly and deeply, and based on the current conditions in global discussions and national targets.

Article 14 of the Agreement provides the details on the targets, taking stock and reviewing them and the progress made towards long-term goals.

- The first such stock-taking covering all aspects such as mitigation, adaptation communications, and support for implementation is expected to take place in 2023, but meetings to prepare for this have already begun and have to conclude by 2018.
- Adaptation is increasingly also expected to become central at the COP meetings, which for the most part have focussed on mitigation. Mitigation addresses the causes of climate change (accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere), whereas adaptation addresses the impacts of climate change.

What are challenges ahead to COP23?

This is the first COP after the United States pulled out of the Paris Agreement and the implications of this at a global platform are likely to become more evident. Several states and cities within the U.S. along with thousands of businesses and celebrities have used this chance to initiate voluntary actions across the country.

America's Pledge, an initiative that is expected to report on the efforts of U.S. states, and sub-state entities to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) of the nine north-eastern states has proposed another 30% drop in power plant emissions from 2020 to 2030. Moreover, it has been reported that a U.S. delegation will in any case attend the Bonn COP and all Paris agreement related meetings until 2020, while other major signatories have reaffirmed their commitment to the Paris agreement.

- Nevertheless, there is speculation whether the formal withdrawal of the U.S. would alter the stance taken by Europe, Australia, and large countries at the COP and what role, if any, the U.S. would play behind the scenes.
- According to earlier reports from the UN and other groups, the NDCs, when added up, fall short of what is needed to keep global temperature rise below 2°C and will likely take us about a degree higher.
- Further, most NDCs are conditional — they depend on financial and technological support from rich countries for their full implementation.
- Carbon dioxide and methane are increasing faster than a decade ago and that efforts being made now at the global and state levels are not enough. It is also evident that the political conditions prevalent today are less favourable to renegotiate the Paris Agreement.

Since the planet and its inhabitants will still have to deal with the impacts of climate change, our only hope is to see a greater readiness on the part of all nations to compromise on their erstwhile hard positions, and sincerity to make progress in reducing emissions and building climate resilience in their development.

Way forward:

The meeting in Bonn comes at a time when it is no longer sufficient to maintain the momentum. A call on governments at all levels, NGOs, the scientific community, the business community, labour organisations and all of civil society to join at COP23 in a grand coalition is the need of the hour to save our Earth and the people and other living things that call it home.