

Media briefing

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Quibbling while our home burns: a decade of missed deadlines

Progress on tackling climate change has been painfully slow, as the UN Global Stocktake showed recently. This briefing sets out just how often world governments have failed to keep their promises and opens the discussion about the hidden brakes on concerted climate action.

The Climate Ambition Summit in New York is the perfect opportunity for the biggest polluters and wealthiest nations to change that pattern of failure.

The background

By the end of the 20th century, evidence strongly indicated humanity's use of fossil fuels was warming Earth's climate. Governments have been promising to do something about it since 1992, when the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was adopted.

In Kyoto in 1997, a number of industrialised nations agreed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in accordance with individual targets, and in Paris in 2015, world leaders agreed that global temperatures should be prevented from rising further than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels if possible, and certainly not higher than 2°C.

Ahead of the Paris meeting, they were asked to submit plans known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) that set out how they would mitigate climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and help their citizens adapt to a hotter world. They also agreed to update and improve those goals every five years — though, at Glasgow's COP26, committed to an extra update in 2022 due to the slow pace of action to that point.

Over the years the scientific evidence for human-induced warming has become overwhelming and the implications increasingly obvious. However, political infighting, and the influence of the fossil fuel sector and other major industries, have dogged efforts to limit climate change from the beginning.

For example, American senators judged Kyoto not to be in the United States' economic best interests and refused unanimously to ratify it, while China and Saudi Arabia reportedly stymied climate and fossil fuel negotiations at G20 meetings in India this summer ahead of COP28. G20 nations emit about four-fifths of all greenhouse gases. Governments around the world continue to allow new fossil fuel extraction, despite agreeing that emissions must fall.

Though frequent warnings have been given about the dangers of this short-term thinking, the NDC pledges as they stand will not prevent warming from exceeding 2°C above pre-industrial levels by the end of this century.

Report card

Governments around the world have missed deadlines for submitting or updating their plans for tackling climate change 59% of the time over the last decade, according to IIED's analysis.

The pattern began before the Paris agreement was even signed. In 2013, the UN invited all parties to the UNFCCC to submit their first plans, known as intended nationally determined contributions (INDCs), "well in advance" of COP21, which took place in late 2015. Only three-quarters, or 146 nations, did so before 1 October 2015.

At Paris it was agreed that parties' INDCs, which transitioned to full NDCs after they ratified the accord, should be updated every five years with the next iteration due at the end of 2020 — the so-called "ratchet" mechanism. Just 73 parties made that deadline, including the UK, Australia and the EU's 27 members, who submitted together.

Because COP26 was delayed by COVID-19, another deadline for updates was set for 30 July 2021. A further 38 countries met it with China, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and India among the notable exceptions. Thirty more parties met a final deadline of 12 October, meaning a total of 141 nations, out of 191, had managed to stick to the five-year 'ratchet' schedule — even if only at the third time of asking.

COP26 in Glasgow produced an agreement that governments would ratchet up their plans still further by the end of the following year, in recognition of the lack of progress so far and the worsening impacts of climate change.

Between the end of the Glasgow summit and a cut-off date of 23 September 2022 — required for the UN to produce its NDC synthesis report ahead of COP27 in Egypt — only 22 parties submitted updated plans. A further 12 did so before the end-of-year deadline, with the EU's 27 members, the USA, Russia and Japan among those who failed to do so.

Deadlines hit and missed

Deadline	Maximum possible submissions	Submissions meeting deadline
1 October 2015	194	146
30 December 2020	191	73
30 July 2021	118	38
12 October 2021	80	30
30 December 2022	192	34
TOTAL	775	321

Some countries handed in updated NDCs between deadlines. China, Saudi Arabia and others submitted their five-year updates during COP26 — but missed the three preceding cut-off points and have not updated their plans since.

Turkey, a G20 member, submitted its first full NDC in October 2021 but had only ratified the Paris agreement days earlier. It failed to hit the 2022 update deadline and submitted its most recent plan this April. The UAE, host of the upcoming COP28, also missed the 2022 deadline, submitting an update in July of this year. The Emiratis' five-year update came in on time.

A small number of nations submitted multiple updates ahead of COP26 but for this analysis we recorded only their first and counted them as having met that deadline.

Twenty countries were found to have lowered their emission reduction ambitions between their first and most recent NDCs, breaking the Paris agreement. They account for 7.9% of global emissions, though Brazil and Russia are responsible for most of that (6.8%). Six have failed to increase their ambitions.

G20 member Mexico has strengthened its plans on paper but because its target has a ‘business-as-usual’ baseline that has been revised upward, these are not more ambitious in absolute terms.

Overall 74% of countries met one of the five-year UN ratchet deadlines and 18% met the end-of-2022 deadline. A notable subset whose submissions fell well below the average was the world’s top oil-producing countries, who managed just 67% and 11%, respectively.

Major oil-producing nations

Country	Hit five-year ratchet?	Hit end of 2022?
USA	Yes	-
Saudi Arabia	-	-
Russia	Yes	-
Canada	Yes	-
China	-	-
Iraq	-	-
UAE	Yes	-
Brazil	Yes	Yes
Kuwait	Yes	-
TOTAL	67%	11%

Iran, Libya and Yemen are not included in our analysis beyond the 2015 deadline because they have not participated in the post-Paris NDC process. Iran would also have been the tenth member of the above table of top oil-producing nations.

Data sources

UNFCCC:

- NDC Registry (<https://unfccc.int/NDCREG>)
- INDC submissions (<https://tinyurl.com/bdh3j33h>)
- Updated NDCs (<https://tinyurl.com/y5a55kdj>)

Other:

- Climate Watch (www.climatewatchdata.org/2020-ndc-tracker)
- US EIA (www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.php?id=709&t=6)

What's holding us back?

The effects of climate change are already ending lives and upending livelihoods in the most vulnerable countries, which also tend to be the poorest and least resilient — [as previous IIED research has shown](#). These nations have also done the least to cause this crisis.

But global warming will affect everyone, as this year's hellish summer of heatwaves, wildfires and floods in much of Europe and North America demonstrated. Given all that, what is behind the lack of collective action?

IIED has identified a number of brakes that are holding back concerted efforts to slow the pace of climate change, and which narrow the sense of what might be possible. They encompass both mitigation of climate change — measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions — and adaptation to its damaging effects.

For example, vast debt burdens among the lowest-income nations mean they have little to spend on measures that would protect their citizens from drought or floods. In addition, [half of the funding they get for climate projects comes as loans](#), driving them deeper into debt. They are often pushed even further into arrears by climate-driven disasters, meaning they have to borrow still more because their budgets cannot stretch to cover reconstruction, in a vicious cycle.

The shadowy system of investor-state dispute settlements is another potential blocker to the green transition. [Previous IIED research](#) has laid bare the extent to which fossil fuel investments are protected by trade agreements that put taxpayers on the hook for billions of dollars in compensation, if companies can successfully claim their business has been disrupted by environment-positive action by governments.

We also know that barely a trickle of the money provided to poorer countries for nature or climate work [makes it to the local level](#). Partly this is due to the maze of intermediary bureaucracy between funder and recipient, which drains capital, but [IIED's previous work](#) has found that representatives of Indigenous Peoples and local communities hold only 11% of board seats on funds designed to deliver some US\$2 billion for biodiversity work.

This week IIED is launching [a new interactive platform](#), which will allow people to submit examples of systems and structures they believe are holding back humanity's attempts to tackle the climate crisis. Once these handbrakes are exposed and researched, they can be removed to the benefit of everyone.

The potential solutions

Structures that put the brakes on action to tackle climate change are deeply embedded in the economic, legal and financial models by which humanity has operated during the last century or more, and particularly since the Second World War.

This way of doing things evolved during a time when climate change was not the greatest problem facing our species — indeed, all species — and so cannot carry us through this crisis.

A collective acknowledgment is required that things must not continue as they are if our goal is to prevent large, and in some cases currently highly populated, areas of Earth becoming practically uninhabitable; but it must be sincere. The evidence demonstrates that promises made so far have been empty.

There is still time.

IIED's long-running programme of work on the debt handbrake has produced recommendations that would lighten the load for developing countries, with more planned. We've found that layering parametric insurance, swaps for climate and nature, pause clauses and other tools [could provide vital relief for people on the front lines of climate change](#).

Elsewhere, the backlash is growing against investor-state dispute settlement as governments realise it can constrain them in unwelcome ways: witness the slow disintegration of the Energy Charter Treaty in Europe. IIED wants to see the international community create a system to reform or end treaties that contain these provisions.

The most important step is to begin to talk about these problems. IIED's Hidden Handbrakes web tool provides a space for people around the world to identify and provide evidence for systems holding back climate action so that collectively we can address them and find solutions.